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OR, The Street Arab's Wake.

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"SANDY SAM," "CIBUTA JOHN," "RAIN-
BOW BOB," "DISCO DAN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ANOTHER "DIFFIKILTY" BREWING.

"SWEET portaters! Skinny, but here's another piece of consarned crookedness a-brewin', sure's ye're born. Jest cast yer weather eye over there. Here's another chance fer me ter try my hand at defective—I mean detective—work, an' shove myself along in th' cornference of Inspector Br— Hello! did ye see *that*?"

It was night, and the hour was ten.

Two boys, at a corner of Broadway and an

BILLY, HALF DEAD AS HE WAS, COULD NOT RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO WINK AT THEM IN THE DROLLEST WAY IMAGINABLE.

other street, were putting away their stock in trade and closing their stand for the night.

To those who have not read the previous "Broadway Billy" stories, we may say that Broadway Billy and his partner, who was known as "Skinny," had formerly been bootblacks, but had now risen to the dignity of "curbstone merchants." They owned a prosperous little corner-stand, and were doing well.

Billy's name was William Weston, but he seldom heard it applied in all its dignity, and as for Skinny—that was what he was generally called. He was a very thin boy, and the name fitted him well.

Billy's great ambition was to become a self-made man, and he seemed to be on the right road. He was strictly honest, as was his partner, and they were making money. Billy attended night school some of the time, and was picking up a fair education, but he still clung fondly to his former bootblack *patois* when on the street.

In his way, Broadway Billy was something of a detective, and a pet hobby of his was to gain the recognition of the police officials. He was never so happy as when prying into some mystery, to aid the right and defeat the wrong, and some of his exploits, as recorded in previous stories, certainly did not lack for merit.

And now for our story.

"What d'ye mean?" queried Skinny, as he paused in his work; "has th' fever broke out on ye again?"

"It has, fer sure. When th' detective fever gits hold of a boy of my age, size, an' previous condition, it's bound ter run its course same as any other distress that human flesh is heir to."

"But," Skinny demanded, "what was it ye seen? Was it some awful tragedy?"

"I dunno but it was, and that is jest what I mean ter find out. You jest shut up shop, my weighty pardner, an' keep things straight till I return. I'm goin' ter foller that carriage."

"Cus out! you're only foolin'."

"Ain't I?"

"If ye ain't ye'd orter be. I'll be glad when th' detective fever leaves ye, so's ye kin keep yer nose out o' other people's business an' tend more to yer own."

"Thank ye, Skinny. You're awful plain-spoken, an' not very considerate o' my feelin's; but, I forgives ye. 'Tis shows yer bringin' up. I kin assure ye that ain't foolin', an' when yonder carriage moves hence, I shall foller it."

"An' what will ye foller it for?" Skinny insisted.

"There, now ye're gettin' back to first principles," Billy declared. "If you wasn't so fat, Skinny, yer ideas would be more at yer command an' easier to get hold of. Too much fat ain't good fer brain, nobow. I tried ter git yer eyes onto th' difficulty when I seen it, but you couldn't get 'em focused in th' right quarter sooner enough. I'll give ye th' facts. Ye see that carriage over there, don't ye?"

"Yes," Skinny responded, "I see that."

"Well, keep yer eye on it fer a second or two an' I'll unwind. Jest a little further up th' street is a store with several big 'lectric lights in front. See that?"

"Yes, I see that."

"Well, keep yer eyes onto them, too. Or one on them an' one on th' carriage, jest as ye please."

"Oh! stop chinnin'," exclaimed Skinny, "an' give me th' facts."

"You're too impatient, my gay an' festive pardner," protested Billy. "It ain't good fer fat folks to be in too much of a hurry. A fat man died in a hurry, once; but that was in a railroad smash. I won't delay no longer, though, fer th' carriage may start off at any minute, an' then ye'd be left in th' darkness o' unlightedness in regard to th' matter, an' ye wouldn't sleep well. I hate—"

"Well, do tell me, an' stop yer palaverin'!"

"Jest so. Well, when I first sot my eye onto that carriage, it was 'tween me an' th' lights, an' I could see right through it. An' what d'ye suppose I seen?"

"Give it up."

"I'll tell ye. I seen a real purty young lady a-strugglin' ter get out o' th' hands of a rascally-lookin' man, an' he had one hand over her mouth an' was pushin' her back into ber seat. Then, jest as th' carriage stopped where it is now, I seen th' winder pulled down an' a white hand come out. But it was only fer a second. As quick as a wink th' hand was pulled in, an' th' winder was shut up ag'in, slap!"

"That does look crooked," Skinny confessed.

"Sweet pertaters! I should say it does!" exclaimed Billy. "I tell ye Skinny, there is

another diffikilty a-brewin' an' I know it. An' I'm goin' ter be in at th' b'ilin', if I kin git there, you bet! I tell ye I'm death on mysteries an' dark ways, every time, an' I mean ter show my friend, th' Inspector, that— Hello! there is another feller gettin' inter th' carriage; an' there th' carriage goes; an' here goes me."

The foregoing has explained the situation: Broadway Billy had witnessed a strange proceeding, and he meant to know what was going on.

The carriage had stopped for some minutes before a hotel, evidently waiting for the man who had just got into it, and now it turned and started up-town.

When it had turned for starting, Billy was holding on behind, and, waving his hand to his partner, both carriage and boy disappeared in short order.

"Sooner er later," Skinny commented, as he gazed at the retreating carriage, "that boy is goin' ter be killed. He is all th' time pokin' his nose inter places where he's got no business. He's a ripper though, is Billy, an' he's done some bully good pieces of shadowin'. I hope he'll come out all right, but I expect nothin' else than some day I'll have ter drape cur corner stand with mournin'. If it wasn't for me he'd be no good at *this* business, an' it's lucky for us both that I don't ketch th' fever too."

With these comments Skinny turned to his work and finished putting away the stock and locking up.

As the carriage rolled away the boy sleuth swung his legs up over the rear axle, there being room and to spare, and taking a good hold with his arms, drew himself up close and held on.

"Here I go, anyhow," he mused. "If there is any crooked work afoot, an' from indercations o' 'pearances I reckon there is, they musn't forget to count me in."

The carriage rolled straight on, and was quite evidently going some distance up-town.

On up Broadway to Union Square it went, and then, strange to say, it wheeled around into University Place and went straight down into Wooster street.

When it finally stopped, before a large, old-fashioned house, it had covered not less than three miles of actual distance, and yet was not more than half a mile away from its starting-point.

Billy, who knew every foot of the great city, noticed this at once.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed, under his breath, "didn't I know it! If there ain't a rotten egg somewhere in Denmark, why all this Tor-foolishness? I'll bet th' heel o' my left boot there's a diffikilty a-brewin', an' a big one, too. Now, Billy, keep yer eyes open."

The carriage had stopped, Billy let himself down to the ground, heartily glad of the opportunity to do so.

He kept well under the shadows, and waited for developments.

They soon came.

The door of the carriage opened at once, and a man sprang out.

A woman then followed, assisted by the man in the carriage, and received and supported by the one outside.

Then followed the other man.

"Wait here," they ordered their driver and then they led the woman toward the house, one on each side of her.

The woman, seemingly, was ill and weak, and did not seem capable of the lively movements Billy had seen her making only a short time previously.

As they ascended the steps the door opened to receive them, closing as soon as they had entered.

A moment later, a basement door opened, and some one, presumably a servant, came out and went down the street.

"That seems ter settle it," mused Broadway Billy. "They're inside, an' I'm here. I'm sort o' shut out in th' cold—ez it were. Hang me, if I wouldn't like ter see th' inside o' that den, though, an' if it wasn't fer th' driver I believe I'd try some way ter git in. Jest as like as not that servant left th' basement door open. It might not be jest accordin' ter Hoyle, an' might not meet th' 'proval of Inspector Br— Hello! what's th' Jehu doin'?"

The driver was getting down, and, as though to give the boy just the chance he wanted, he went around to the other side of the horses to adjust some part of their harness.

Billy was a boy to think and act almost at one and the same time, and no sooner was the coast clear than he slipped out from under the carriage and dodged to the basement door of the house.

So far so good; and trying the door carefully and finding it unfastened, he opened it and glided in.

CHAPTER II.

BILLY ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN Broadway Billy found himself actually inside the house, and with the door closed behind him, his heart began to beat a little faster than usual.

Of course, the door was right at hand and unfastened, and he could easily retreat, but he had no idea of doing so.

Having embarked upon the adventure, he meant to see it to the end.

He had opened and closed the door quite noiselessly, and now he stood undecided what he should do next.

Just ahead of him was a flight of stairs leading to the floor above. On his left was a door, partly open, showing a dimly-lighted dining-room. Further down the hall was another door, closed, but light could be seen under it.

This last door evidently belonged to the kitchen, and, late as the hour was, voices were heard in that direction.

Billy listened for a few moments, and soon learned that the servants had company and were doing their best to enjoy themselves.

"Only th' pot-slingers havin' a sort o' social jubilee," the boy mused.

He knew at once that this was no place for him. He might be discovered at any moment, be taken for a thief and arrested.

This, to say the least, would be very unpleasant and inconvenient.

Billy had made too many good friends, though, to fear any serious results from such a mishap. And, too, he was not unknown at Police Headquarters. What he had most to look out for was persons who, instead of arresting him and turning him over to the police, might murder him. If he was known to the police for the several neat pieces of work he had done, he was not unknown to many of the greatest rascals in the city.

But which way should he go? He had no intention of retreating, that was settled. Should he go up the stairs?

While he stood there, in the corner-jamb behind the door, he heard other voices on the floor above, but those in the kitchen being much the louder, he could not make out any words.

If he ventured up to the next floor, he might be in even more danger than where he was. But he had entered the house with an object to gain, and clearly that was not to be gained by standing still.

He must do something.

In a moment more he ventured to move toward the stairs.

Barely had he taken two steps, however, when he heard some one approaching the door from without.

Springing quickly back, he just had time to reach his corner when the door opened.

The person who entered was the one who had gone out only a few minutes previously, and under her apron she carried a pail, which she took out as soon as she closed the door.

It was evidently a pail of beer, with which the servants meant to regale themselves.

"Runnin' th' growler, hey?" thought Billy, as he squeezed back into his corner as though trying to make himself invisible. "Wonder what sort o' coop I've got inter, anyhow."

The servant stopped to fasten the door, and it was a wonder that she did not see the boy.

She did not, though, and as soon as she had made the door secure, she went on and entered the kitchen.

"Sweet pertaters! but that was a parrow call fer my scalp," muttered Billy, "an' I reckon I'll take my chances an' venture up-stairs."

Once more he left his corner and advanced.

He reached the foot of the stairs all right, and began to ascend.

All went well until he was about half-way to the top. Then one of the steps gave a loud creak.

Instantly the boy stopped, expecting discovery must surely follow.

Evidently, though, the noise was not heard, or if it was, no one paid any attention to it, for no one appeared.

With muttered imprecations against creaking steps in general, and these in particular, Billy went on.

This time he reached the top without further trouble.

In appearance, the upper hall was far superior to the lower one. It was well carpeted, and furnished as halls in the better class of houses usually are.

One light was burning dimly in the front end of the hall, but the rear end was quite dark.

Billy hastened with silent care to place himself in the shadowed end.

Once there, he felt he was secure for the time being.

The door of a room—the parlor—was slightly ajar, and it was in that room that the voices were.

The boy tried to catch some words, but was too far away to be able to do so.

For some little time he remained in his new hiding-place, and then, beginning to realize that he was not getting on very fast, so far as gaining any information was concerned, he was about to steal forward to the door when it suddenly swung open, and several persons came out.

Instantly Billy crouched back into a corner.

The persons who came out of the room were, first, a woman; then two other women, hard-featured and masculine in appearance, leading a beautiful girl between them; and lastly, two men.

The girl seemed to be half-asleep, as though under the influence of some powerful drug.

The woman ahead led the way up-stairs, the others following her.

"That's th' gal that's in th' diffikilty," muttered Billy, "an' I know it. I bet my boots she's here as a prisoner, an' ag'in her will, too. I wonder what in Old Nick is up, anyhow? Wonder if I dare foller 'em up?"

Leaving his place of concealment, he crept along the wall to the stairs, and then, as soon as those ahead had turned on the next landing, he began to go up after them.

His heart was in his throat, as the saying has it, but more with excitement than with apprehension.

When the boy arrived at the top of the stairs, the others were just going up the next flight.

Billy paused again to let them get a little start ahead of him.

The landings were but dimly lighted, and by using care he had a reasonable chance of not being discovered.

Few words were being spoken, and none of importance.

When the persons he was watching were half-way up the next flight of stairs, Billy started to follow, keeping close to the wall and using all the care he could command.

And so they went on, leaders and follower, until the very top of the house was reached.

There it was almost dark.

Billy did not venture to put his head above the landing, however, until he could learn what was to be done.

Lucky it was for him that he did not, for there the woman who was leading the way turned on the gas to its full extent.

Then Billy saw something that gave him quite a start.

The upper story of the house looked far more like a prison than private dwelling.

There were several heavy doors on both sides of the hall, not more than eight feet apart, and each one was secured on the outside with two large hooks.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy came very near exclaiming aloud, but managed to hold back, "what sort o' den o' hard times an' iniquity have I got inter, anyhow? It 'pears ter me I'm bound ter tumble inter th' worst sort o' holes in all Gotham, when I put on my war-paint. This looks like a sort o' private jail. Wonder what it all means?"

Having lighted the gas, the woman—who seemed to be the proprietress of the house—opened one of the heavy doors and invited her companions to enter.

They all did so, the two hard-faced women with the girl between them going first, the two men next, and the proprietress following after.

Then another light was lighted in the room—or cell, for it was more like the latter.

"You see," Billy then heard the proprietress remark, "what a neat cage I have for such pretty birds."

"Yes, Madam Winchester," one of the men responded, "and I guess she will not be likely to get out of your hands."

"Well, hardly," with a laugh. "And now let me return to the parlor. My women will attend to her."

Broadway Billy hastily yet silently sprang up the remaining steps, and darted to the furthest end of the landing, where, fortunately, he found a large trunk behind which he quickly concealed himself.

Madam Winchester and the two men left the room and passed down-stairs, the woman turn-

ing down the light in the landing as she passed it.

"That was another purty close shave," Billy thought, "but a miss is as good as a mile. What next on th' programme? This is beginnin' ter grow jest a trifle interestin', now, an' I want ter see it to th' end."

For the present he dared not leave his hiding-place.

"I wonder who this one is?" he heard one of the two women remark.

"That ain't none of our business," the other answered. "We gets our pay, an' that is all we need worry about."

"Well, you needn't be so short an' snappy about it."

"I didn't mean to be, but that is jest th' facts, all the same. Come, now, let's get her undressed an' into th' bed, so's we can get down to th' kitchen ag'in."

"Well, hold her up so's I can. She's got a good dose o' drug in her, I reckon. She won't know what's happened when she wakes up in th' mornin'."

"You're about right."

Considerable more of such talk followed, and then the two women put out the light in the room, came out and hooked the door, and then went down to join their companions in the regions below.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, in a low tone, as soon as they were gone, "but this just peels th' top crust. I knowed there was a dilemma a-rowin', soon's I spotted th' horns, an' now I'm quite aware of it. Here's a consarned diffikilty here, full size; an' so am I. I'm goin' inter this case, I am, teeth, toe-nails, an' tongue; an' if I kin get that gal out o' here I'm goin' ter do it. There'll be a right lively scrimmage, I have no doubt, but I'll try ter keep on top o' th' heap if I can, we bet!"

CHAPTER III. CORNERED!

WHEN the two hard-faced women went down-stairs, the boy raised himself from behind the trunk and was startled to hear a groan in one of the cell-like rooms.

It was the one nearest to where he stood.

Instantly followed others, and then in one of the rooms was heard a woman praying fervently, and in still another some one was sobbing bitterly.

Billy's hair seemed to stand on end.

Where all had been so silent before, now were heard the most dismal sounds imaginable.

What did it all mean?

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy muttered, "I wonder if I'm awake? I dunno but I'll hev ter stick a pin inter myself ter see. Have I got inter a chamber of horrors, nightmares, an' sich like? If I wasn't here on biz, I reckon I'd make tracks out, mighty quick. But, I am here on biz, an' I mean ter know th' hull secret o' this royal crib, we bet!"

But the boy was at loss to know just what move to make next.

"I've got ter play this game most mighty keeful," he reflected, "or it won't come out right, an' mebbly I won't either. I've got no special desire ter stay here any longer than I want ter, Lord knows. It strikes me, from th' general 'pearances o' th' looks o' th' ranch, that it must be a sort o' private mad-house. Wonder if I'm right. That remains ter be seen. Now, what am I ter do? This ain't no pleasant place ter tarry in, an' I feel heaps sorry fer that purty girl they've jest shut up."

He thought for a few moments, and then the sound of voices below decided him.

"I'll steal down to th' parlor door," he said to himself, "an' listen ter what is said. Mebbly I'll git onto th' leadin' facts o' th' circumstances. It is a heap resky, I own, but it is jest impossible ter hear anything away up here, an' so here goes. If I git nabbed I'll have ter trust ter my limber tongue."

His mind made up on the point, he lost no time.

Getting out from behind the trunk, he began at once to descend the stairs.

His movements were silent, but rapid, and in a few moments he was in the lower hall, on the main floor.

The parlor door was slightly ajar, and the boy moved across to it as quickly as he could and listened.

He was now walking upon very tender ice. If one of the servants should come up from below, or one of the trio in the parlor should come out suddenly, he would surely be discovered.

The nearest point of concealment that offered

was at the rear of the hall, in the shadow of the stairway, and Billy measured the distance and calculated the advantages at a glance.

About the first scrap of the conversation he caught was this:

"But it has always been my rule, gentlemen, to deal direct with the principal, and I supposed I was doing so in this instance."

It was Madam Winchester who spoke.

"No, you are not dealing with the principal direct, madam," one of the men returned, "but through us—or through me. I am, as I said, a lawyer, and I have charge of the case."

And—pardon me, but it has slipped me—your name?"

"My name is Carter, madam; Robert Carter."

"And it is to you I am to look for the payments, then?"

"It is; all the business will be done through me."

"And I am never to know who the principal is, or anything about my new boarder, eh?"

"That is it, exactly."

Broadway Billy was taking this all in, eagerly. It proved that he was not far wrong in his "mad-house" theory.

And while he listened he resolved to risk a little more, in order to see as well as hear.

Accordingly, he moved another pace and peered into the room.

The door was only an inch or two ajar, and the room being lighter than the hall, he stood a fair chance of not being seen.

The three persons there were sitting with their faces toward the door, and so the boy had a good opportunity to look at them.

"I've got ye all photographed on th' tin-pan o' my brain, my beauties," he muttered, "an' I don't forgit faces very easy, 'specially sich evil-lookin' mugs as yours."

Madam Winchester was just turning to speak to the other of the two men.

"And you, sir," she said, "you are a doctor, I believe I understood you to say?"

"Yes, madam," was the reply, "I am a doctor; my name is Phelps Ketcham."

"Ketcham—I will try to remember it. I find it very hard to retain names. I suppose you will visit the patient occasionally, will you not?"

"Well—er, yes, occasionally, but not frequently. You see it is such a mild case."

"You say it is; I have yet to learn what you call 'mild.'"

"Of course; but I assure you it is a mild case, and by that I mean that the young lady is not violently insane. At least, she has never shown any such symptoms of it. Hers is a genuine case of madness, though. She—"

"Sir! would you insinuate that I have any in my care who are not mad?" the woman interrupted, warmly.

"No, no, certainly not," was the return, "but in this case no possible doubt can be raised. She has been examined by the very best of insanity experts. But her madness, as I said before, is not violent. On the contrary, it is a very mild case."

"Then she will be the more easy to take care of."

"No doubt."

"Further, madam," said Mr. Carter, the lawyer, "you are requested to see that she has the very best of care and attention."

"Certainly."

"You see, she has the insane idea that she is the daughter of some wealthy man, and an heiress. That is all nonsense. At present her hobby is that she is Miss Vina Harrington, of No. — West — street. The fact is, Miss Harrington is dead. She died two days ago, and will be buried to-morrow. This young lady was her schoolmate, and ever since the news of Miss Harrington's death reached her, she has insisted that she is Miss Harrington. I make this explanation so that you may know just how to deal with the patient."

"I understand, sir, I understand perfectly," the woman assured.

"I'll bet yer life ye do," thought the young spy; "I begin ter understand it myself."

"And above all things," Mr. Carter then went on to caution, "she must not be given a chance to escape."

Madam Winchester laughed.

"Do you think she is likely to escape, after what you saw up-stairs?"

"Well, no; but then I wanted to give you full instructions just as they were given to me."

"Oh! it is all right; but it is never necessary to caution me not to allow a patient to escape. One has never escaped yet, and I have kept this place for a number of years."

"Yes, and your place was, as I have told you, highly recommended to us."

"I have had a great many patients," the woman explained, "and many have been taken away completely cured, after a few months. Some I now have, have been with me for years. Some others, alas! have died here."

"That is to be expected," remarked Doctor Ketcham, sadly. "Death is an invader who respects no time or place."

"Well, madam," the lawyer next said, "I will pay you now for the first quarter, and will take your receipt for the same. How much did I understand you to say?"

"My charge for patients of the first class is seventy-five dollars a month. You want the young lady to have, you said, the very best of care and attention, and—"

"Exactly, exactly; and that will be two hundred and twenty-five for the quarter. Here is the money, and you will please sign this receipt."

While speaking, the lawyer counted out the required sum, and then entering the amount upon an already-filled-out receipt, handed money and receipt to the woman, together with his pen.

Madam Winchester first put the money into her pocket, and then signed the receipt and handed it and the pen back.

"Thank you," said Mr. Carter, politely. "And now, Mr. Ketcham, our business being done, we will go."

Both gentlemen arose, and Broadway Billy saw that it was time for him to dodge out of sight.

He turned to do so, but at that instant the loose step in the stairs gave a loud creak, showing that some one was coming up.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy muttered, "but here's a tight fix. Which way am I ter turn?"

He had no time to decide. He was now halfway between the front room door and the basement stairs, and there was danger in both directions.

In the first place, if he had darted quickly up the stairs leading to the floor above, he might have escaped; but he had his mind set upon the rear end of the hall as his best retreat, and of course had no warning of any one coming up the lower stairs before the step creaked.

He saw this now, and was about to try it, late as the chance was, when the parlor door swung open and Madam Winchester and the two men stepped out, and at the same time one of the mentioned hard-featured women appeared at the top of the basement stairs.

The boy was fairly caught; he knew it would require his best efforts to get him out of the fix; he put his inventive brain instantly at work; and, to gain time, he set his limber tongue in motion.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed, before any one else could speak. "I thought I'd got inter a deaf an' dumb 'sylum! There didn't seem ter be nobody ter home—ez it were. I knocked at th' parlor door, but ye didn't seem ter hear me, an' I was jist goin' ter holler down below ter see if I couldn't raise th' cook, or somebody else. I'm glad ter see ye've all come to. I'm here on biz, I be, an' if there's a man in this camp called Carter, he's th' feller I want ter see."

CHAPTER IV.

TOO SHARP FOR THE SHARPS.

BROADWAY BILLY was making a bold strike, and he did not see his way clear.

It is the desperate case that requires the desperate remedy, though, as the old saw has it, and he meant to apply the remedy in this instance in strong doses.

He had hit upon a plan—that is, the idea upon which to build—and had, as usual, plunged right in.

Here he was, in a strange house without permission, and now had boldly declared that he was there on business; in fact, had announced that he wanted to see Lawyer Carter, a man whom he had never seen or heard of in his life, until within the last five minutes.

How was he to get out of it? He hardly knew; but he was a rapid thinker, and putting together all that he had overheard, he thought he could invent some sort of plausible story.

But he had no time to study it out; whatever came from his tongue he would have to stick to, covering his tracks as best he could.

"You want to see a man named Carter?" the lawyer immediately asked.

"Yes," Billy answered; "leastwise I guess I do. Is that your name?"

"It is."

"You're my turnip, then, sure. I've come here a-purpose ter see ye. How d'ye do?" and the audacious young Arab offered his hand.

This was all to gain time. Mr. Carter failed to notice the proffered hand, but demanded:

"Well, what do you want?" "Pardon me, Mr. Carter," interrupted the proprietress of the place, thus giving the boy just the chance to collect his ideas; "but let me ask the young vagabond a question or two."

"Do so, madam," said the lawyer, as he gave way at once.

"Boy," the woman demanded severely, "how did you get into this house?"

"Walked in," answered Billy, promptly.

"Let us have no attempt at levity," said the woman, more severely than ever. "I asked you how you got in."

"Might just as well 'cuse me of a 'tempt at soocricide as ter 'cuse me o' levity," Billy returned. "I never trifle. I am solid truth, clear through. I told ye I walked in, an' so I did. Did ye s'pose I was carried in?"

"Boy, will you answer my question?" the proprietress demanded fiercely, with a stamp of the foot.

Billy jumped in pretended alarm.

"Great cats!" he exclaimed, "I thought ye was goin' ter jump on me. I have answered yer—"

"Oh! I mean what door did you enter at? Who let you in?" the woman interrupted.

"Why didn't ye say so, then?" asked Billy, with an injured air. "It is just like a woman, ter ask questions wrong-end-first an' then expect a whole cyclopedeer o' information. You asked me—"

"Oh! you little wretch!" and with this interruption the now thoroughly angered woman caught Billy by the shoulders and gave him a severe shaking; "now, will you keep still, and answer my question, as you should!"

The doctor and the lawyer both seemed to be highly amused, and even the hard-faced servant—or nurse—allowed her features to relax a little.

"Now, ma'm, be reasonable," Billy admonished, as soon as he was released. "How d'ye speck I'm goin' ter answer ye if I keep still? It is jest onpossible, an' can't be did nobow. But, I'll hasten an' try ter make th' pint clear to ye, fer I ain't by no means fond o' bein' shook up. I kim in by that door—that door right there," pointing to the street door.

The woman looked surprised.

"What! you entered by that door?" she demanded.

"Jest so, ma'm."

"I don't believe it. You are telling me a falsehood. That door is always kept locked."

"Ma'm," said Billy, solemnly, "your cruel words cut me to the sore—I mean the quick. I cannot tell a lie; I did it with my little—I mean ter say my great-granddad was a preacher, an' I—"

"Boy, will you listen? I tell you that door is always kept locked, and—"

"Not always, ma'm, er I wouldn't be here. I found th' door unfastened, an' in I kem. Th' spring must 'a' fooled ye this time, sure."

Mr. Ketcham stepped to the door and tried it. It was locked.

"The door is locked," he announced.

Broadway Billy went forward to look at it. He saw at a glance that it was fastened with a night-lock.

"In course it is locked," he said. "I s'pose when th' door was shut last time it worked all right. I thought I heard somethin' click. But say, this ain't no Court o' Special Sessions, wi' th' grand jury on th' sofa, is it? So fur ez I kin see, it ain't; an' as I'm here on biz, I'd like ter state my biz an' git home. My mammy will be cryin' so awful hard that her false teeth won't fit for a week. I—"

"But what right had you to enter my house in this way?" demanded Madam Winchester.

"Why did you not ring?"

"I acted accordin' ter orders, ma'm," the boy returned promptly.

"You were ordered to steal into my house like a—"

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy, "but you do weary me. If I ever git married, I reckon it'll be to a deaf an' dumb gal."

"Listen to me, boy," broke in Lawyer Carter. "Who sent you here, and what do you want?"

Billy had by this time got his story made up, and was now ready for the worst of the ordeal.

"There!" he exclaimed, "that is hoss-sense. If I'd been 'lowed ter state th' true facts o' th'

sarcumstances first off, th' hull affair would ha' been settled an' I'd been half-way home. If there's any one thing that I hate more'n another—"

"Hold on," ordered Carter; "that is not to the point. Tell me your story, now, and in few words."

"Yours ter command," responded Billy, with a bow, "an' here goes: Ye see, I was comin' through West—street, a little while ago, when a man kem out of No. —, an' asked me if I could run on an errand for him. I 'lowed I could, if he would roll a full-moon inter my pocket. He passed over th' coin at once, an' I told him ter state th' biz. He—"

"You say it was a man?" the lawyer interrupted.

Billy "caught on" at once, and saw that his story was going to have a fair chance of being believed.

In mentioning West—street, and No. —, he was repeating the address he had only a few minutes before heard the lawyer mention to Madam Winchester as the home of Vina Harrington.

He saw now that the lawyer would take the bait, but that he must say that it was a woman who had sent him.

The lawyer's interruption proved to the boy's satisfaction that his employer was a woman. The tone of his question proved it, unless he was laying a trap for the boy to fall into; but Billy was a keen judge of human nature, and felt secure in his position.

"Did I say a man?" he responded at once; "then that was a slip. I meant ter say it war a woman. No wonder I git mixed up, after all th' cross-questions ye've fired at me. Ye've got me so excited an' confused that I don't know which pocket my right hand goes inter: Yes, it was a woman."

"Well, go on—go on!"

"Jest so. Well, th' lady asked me if I knowed th' city, an' I 'lowed I did. Then she gev me a note."

"This note," sez she, 'is fer Mr. Robert Carter, an'—'"

"Where is the note?" Carter demanded, in haste.

Billy was now secure.

"That's jist where the constarned mean little difficulty comes in," protested Billy. "I've lost it."

"The deuce you have!" cried the lawyer, angrily. "I've a notion to wring your neck for you."

"Hold yer hosses, now," admonished the boy, "an' hear me out. If I'd knowed ye would git so mighty huffy over a little thing like that, I wouldn't 'a' come here ter tell ye. I've tried ter do th' best I could, an' I didn't lose it a-purpose."

"Well, what did the note say? Did you read it?"

"Say, do I look like a feller that kin read writin'? Do ye see anything 'bout me that p'int to 'ards a college eddycation?"

"Come, come! go on with your story."

"Jest what I'm tryin' ter do, boss, if ye'll only give me half a show, I'm—"

"Go on—go on!"

"Well, th' lady sez ter me, sez she, 'I want you ter find Mr. Carter an' give him this note. He may be at th' — Hotel. If not, then take it at once to No. — Wooster street. He will be there, I think.'"

"An' if he ain't?" inquires I.

"Then," sez she, 'burn th' note up an' don't look no further. It don't mount ter much, anyhow.'"

"But," said Madam Winchester, "you said she told you to enter my house without knocking. How about that?"

"That's about all of it. 'Don't raise th' dead ringin' th' bell,' sez th' lady, 'but, if th' door happens ter be unfastened, go right in.' Ye see I did."

"It is strange; I do not understand how the door came to be left unfastened. I will have a new lock put on it the first thing to-morrow."

"Well," said Billy, "I'll be goin'. I'm sorry I lost th' note, but when I found I had, an' there was no help fer it, I wasn't so mean as not ter come here an' tell ye. Good-night, all, an'—"

"You hold on," ordered Carter, laying his hand roughly upon the lad's arm; "wait till you are told to go. Pheips," turning to Dr. Ketcham, "what do you think of this story?"

"Hang me if I know," was the answer. "It must be straight, though, I guess; else how could it be told? It could not be invented, that is certain."

"No, that is plain enough; but still it seems a little strange."

"Boy," demanded the doctor, "how long were you here before we found you?"

"Two seconds, more or less," Billy replied. "I just peeped inter th' parlor, an' then turned ter see if I couldn't find a servant."

"Do you know us?"

"No; but I reckon you're th' owners o' this house. I think I saw th' lady payin' her rent to ye."

"Oh! let him go," said the lawyer, "he don't know any more than the law allows. We will go and see about the note. Go, you young rascal!"

"Kerrect," said Billy; and he lost no time in placing himself on the other side of the door.

CHAPTER V.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS AGAIN.

"SWEET pertaters an' Boston beans!" was the street-sleuth's exclamation, as soon as he was clear of the house.

"That was a narrow squeeze, if anybody kin tell what that is," he muttered, "an' I had ter stretch th' truth awfully ter git out. I hate a lie as bad as I hate bad money, but when my liberty, an' mebbly my life, too, 'pends on my lyin', I'd like ter see th' feller that kin git ahead o' me. All is fair in love an' war, so I've heard, an' this kin be figgered inter th' war racket. An' it is war, too; leastwise it will be. I believe there is dark deeds around, an' I want to shed a little light onto 'em. I'm never so happy as when I'm up to my ears in detective difflities."

The boy had by this time reached a corner of the street, and there he stopped.

"Now, look here, Billy," he said to himself, "I hope you ain't goin' ter give up th' game, jest 'cause ye got nabbed, be ye? You an' me is purty good pards, Billy, an' we've been inter more consarned little difflities than we kin shake a stick at. This little trouble wasn't a 'skeeter bite. Git skart? Well, we reckon not. We're goin' ter see this thing out if it takes a leg."

Billy meant what he said.

"I wonder what's ter be their next move?" he reflected. "Let me sum up th' case an' see how it stands. In th' first place I scented th' difflity a-brewin', an' took th' trail. It led me to that old rookery that I've just got out of. That 'establishment is a sort o' private mad-house, er else I'm no prophet. They've just took a girl in there, an' they mean ter pay seventy-five dollars a month for her keep. That looks mighty scaly, ter say th' least. Let me put on my old think-in-cap, an' see if I kin git th' leadin' ideas through my hair."

The boy pulled off his cap, and scratched his head vigorously.

"Anybody might think, ter see me," he mused, "that I was after creepers; but I ain't; I'm tryin' ter rake up ideas. I 'most wish I'd been born wif less hair an' more brains. Brains is handy ter have with ye, sometimes. Now let me see. That gal thinks, so they said, that she is one Vina Harrington, of No. — West — street. That same Vina, so they said, is dead, an' is ter be planted ter-morrer. Jest so, uncle; but now unfold another chapter. In order ter git out o' that den, I had ter lie like sin. I hit th' nail square on top, too. I told 'em I had been sent from No. — West — street, an' they swallowed th' story like a bummer swollers his toddy. What does that show?"

Billy scratched again, evidently for more ideas, and then pulled on his cap in a way that showed his mind was made up.

"It means some sort o' pizen work goin' on," he decided, "an' I'm goin' ter know jest what it is. I've grappled wif long-hour dilemmers afore now, an' I ain't goin' ter take a back seat this time, we bet! Now, one of two things: is ter be did—I might say three. One is, ter git back inter that crib an' try ter see th' gal; an' other is, ter go up an' see what is ter be learned at No. — West — street; an' th' third, ter lay fer Doctor Ketcham an' Lawyer Carter an' folle 'em ag'in. Reckon I'd better do th' last-mentioned. I must be most mighty keeful not ter let 'em git their feelers onter me ag'in, though, fer if they do they'll make it onpleasant fer me. An' mebbly I won't make it onpleasant fer them, if I git a whack at 'em. I'm jest goin' ter buckle on my armor, now, an' wade right in. I'm death on evil doin's, an' I'll make th' fur fly, we bet! Sev'ral yarns have been writ up about me, an' mebbly this case will make another. If so, they kin call it Broadway Billy's Battle; but jest how th' said B. B. is goin' ter come out, remains ter be seen."

Not only was Billy talking away at a lively

gait, in half-muttered tones, but he was thinking.

It was clear that something of an evil nature was being carried on, but what it was he could not clearly see.

As usual, he had stumbled upon the case right in the middle—as it were—and could not grasp either end.

But he had a theory, and that theory was that the girl just imprisoned in the private mad-house was Vina Harrington.

That was all he could fix upon.

How, though, Vina could be both dead and alive at one and the same time, puzzled him.

The real Vina was reported dead, and her funeral was to take place on the morrow.

Surely there could be no deception about that; at least none so far as Billy could then see.

"Th' ways that are dark an' th' tricks that are vain, are numerous, though," he reasoned, "an' villainy is always inventin' some new dodge ter hoodwink justice."

While reflecting upon what to do next, the idea came to the boy to get back, if possible, to his old place under the carriage.

This would give him one good advantage.

If he remained where he was, and the carriage should start in the opposite direction at a rapid gait, he would be left and would lose the trail.

He had decided that his best course was to follow the two men. He now knew where the girl was, and could not forget the house, so his wisest course was to make an effort to learn more.

The two men were likely to appear at any moment, so he had no time to lose.

Crossing the street, he went back to where the carriage was standing on the opposite side.

The driver was upon the seat, nodding sleepily.

Billy passed right on for a little distance, and then, under cover of a wagon that happened at that moment to come lumbering along, gained his desired point.

He had just reached the carriage when the two men came out of the house.

One gave directions to the driver, both got into the carriage, Billy caught hold with legs and arms, and away they all went.

The carriage turned and proceeded in the direction it had come; namely, to Union Square.

There it fell into Broadway, and continued on up that great thoroughfare to West — street.

It turned there, and soon stopped before a large house.

Billy noticed at once, in the dim light, that there was crape hanging on the bell-knob.

"Somebody is dead here, anyhow," was his thought. "It 'pears ter me that I've got a bigger thing on hand than I counted on. Mebbly I won't be able ter git onto th' main facts, after all."

As soon as the carriage stopped, both men got out.

Billy pulled himself up close to the body of the vehicle to escape discovery.

A word to their driver, and then the pair ascended the broad steps and entered the house.

Late as the hour now was, the doors were evidently unfastened, unless the lawyer possessed a key which he could use with remarkable quickness.

The secret of it was soon out.

A few moments after the two men had entered, another man came out and went to a wagon that stood just ahead of the carriage. Billy had not noticed this wagon before.

It proved to be an undertaker's wagon. No doubt he had left the door open, or others had left it open for him.

That, though, did not matter.

What the boy most wanted was to find some easy means of getting into that house.

Any one who did not know the boy might think that one adventure of the kind would be sufficient for one night.

Billy did not look at it that way. He had been captured once, but that was no proof that he would be taken again. He was in earnest, and he knew that he must run great risks in order to gain.

Could he have foreseen, however, the trap that was yawning for him, he might well have hesitated and backed out.

The carriage-driver and the undertaker exchanged a few words of commonplace nature, and then the undertaker took a large bag from the wagon—a bag that was well filled with objects very irregular in shape, and quite heavy.

"Ice?" queried the carriage-driver, and the undertaker responded, "Ice."

The bag seemed to be wet, and no one could have had a suspicion that it contained anything else.

On the undertaker's wagon was a boy, and as

soon as the bag was taken out the undertaker ordered him to drive home, put away the horse and wagon, and go to bed.

The lad drove away immediately, and the undertaker went up the steps and entered the house with the bag upon his shoulder.

Billy noticed that he did not secure the door after him, in fact—did not quite close it.

Here was the young street scout's chance to enter. Dare he accept it?

It did not take him long to make up his mind that he would.

He had already let go his hold of the carriage, in order not to let the driver feel the movement after it had stopped and he had settled down to doze, and he retreated silently up the street for some yards.

Then he turned to the sidewalk and came boldly back.

Already the driver had leaned over in his favorite position for dozing.

Billy made no unnecessary noise, but went straight to the broad steps, ran up to the door, opened it carefully, and went in.

The driver glanced up lazily as he heard the boy's feet on the steps, but paid no further attention.

The instant he was in the hall Billy cast a quick glance around.

If he was discovered, it was his intention to beat a hasty retreat. There would be no use trying to tell another "ghost story" to Carter and Ketcham.

No one was to be seen, though, and he pushed the door shut without any noise.

The hall was richly furnished, bespeaking a home of wealth.

On each side was a door, and both were partly open.

Beyond one of the doors all was darkness. The other room was lighted, but not very brightly.

This latter room was handsomely furnished, and Billy heard voices within.

With one more cautious look around, to make quite sure that he was not seen, the more-than-daring lad advanced silently to the door of this room and looked in.

Four persons were there.

He recognized Carter and Ketcham at once, and besides these there were a handsome, queenly-looking woman, and a fine-looking man.

The woman seemed to be about twenty-two or three years of age, and the man about ten years older.

Billy had no time to catch what was being said, for no sooner had he looked in than he heard steps coming up from the lower part of the house.

He sprang up, and glanced around for some place to hide. The dark room on the opposite side of the hall was the only place that offered. There was not a second to spare, so into that room the boy sprang, and began to grope around for a place of concealment.

The footsteps had now gained the top of the stairs, and were coming along the hall.

Billy moved with cautious haste, and the next moment brought up against an object that proved to be a coffin.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE COFFIN.

"SWEET pertaters!" he ejaculated under his breath, "what is this? Hang me if it ain't a coffin!"

Billy's nerves were good, but they received quite a shock.

It cannot be very pleasant to run against a coffin in the dark.

The boy had no time to spare, for the steps were right at the door, as it seemed.

He felt his way around the coffin, and then he came into contact with a big high-back chair.

To dodge around behind that chair was but the work of a second.

At the same instant the door opened.

The opening of the door to its full extent threw some light into the room, and Billy peered out from behind the chair to learn who had entered.

It was the undertaker.

The man advanced to the middle of the room, and there lighted one jet of the chandelier.

Billy gave a start. Was he well hid from view! or was he not concealed at all?

He cast a hasty glance about to assure himself upon that point, and, to his great satisfaction, found that he could not have chosen a better place had the room been fully lighted.

The big chair stood in a corner of the room, well back, and right before it stood the coffin, upon rests.

The chair was covered, and there was space enough behind it for two boys of Billy's size.

"Thank goodness I'm all safe so far," the boy thought, "an' now I'm ready ter see all that goes on. Ring up th' curtain, Sammy—if that's yer name, an' let th' elephant begin ter dance. I'm inter this thing up ter my ears, now, an' I'm ready fer anything."

Having satisfied himself that he could not be seen, the boy looked out slyly, around the chair and under the coffin, to see what was going on.

The man was just moving the bag from near the door, where, evidently, he had laid it down on first entering the house, and before going down to the lower floor.

He carried it near to the coffin and laid it down upon a piece of old carpet.

It was rather a strange way of handling ice, as Billy thought, and the more so since no ice-box was to be seen.

The boy could not understand it.

Having placed the bag where he wanted it, the undertaker turned down the light and went out.

Billy listened to learn where he was going.

As near as he could tell he merely crossed the hall to the other room.

The young sleuth listened closely, and heard a low rap at the opposite door.

"Come in!" responded a voice.

"Now," decided Billy, "I must hear something of what they've got ter say, an' this ain't th' place ter hear it. I must crawl out an' git near th' other door. It won't take me two seconds to retreat to my hidin'-place, if any one comes this way; an' if I'm seen— Well, I must take th' chances. Here goes."

To decide was to act, and he left his place of concealment at once and crossed to the door.

With cautious care he next looked out into the hall.

The coast was all clear, and not a sound was to be heard save the voice in the opposite room.

Hesitating only a moment, Billy slipped out and crossed the hall to the opposite door.

There he listened.

"You say you are all ready?" were the first words he caught, and they were spoken by the woman.

"Yes, Miss Harrington," was the reply; and Billy, venturing to look in, saw that it was the undertaker who replied.

"Very well," said the lady, "sit down for a moment and then we will assist you. Our scheme seems to have miscarried a little, or is likely to, I fear."

"How so?" queried the undertaker, with sudden interest.

"Why, some young rascal of a boy is trying to play an underhand game with me, it seems," the lady explained.

"What! are we discovered?"

"I do not know, but I believe that boy has learned enough to cause us trouble if he wants to."

"And what boy is it you speak of? What has he been doing?"

"I will tell you, sir, since we are all concerned in the matter, and must stand together."

"Pray do so."

"Well, while Mr. Carter and Mr. Ketcham were in the Wooster street house attending to that part of the affair, they discovered a boy in the hall. They caught him, and the boy told them he had come there from this house, giving street and number, with a note for Mr. Carter. He said the note was given him by a lady. Now it is positively certain that the boy's story was false, and what he was doing there and how he could make up such a story, are mysterious."

"This is serious," said the undertaker, thoughtfully.

"So I and Mr. Hoodley consider it," the lady agreed.

"Yes, I do consider it so," said the gentleman who had been called by name, "and I do not know what to make of it."

"And what became of the boy?" the undertaker asked.

"Why," answered Ketcham, "we allowed him to go. We could not doubt his story, as it was straight in every particular. He looked like an honest lad, and certainly deceived us in a very clever manner."

"He did, indeed," echoed Carter. "And it is something we cannot see through. I am sorry, now, that we did not bring him back here with us."

"Bet yer life I ain't, then," thought Billy. "I'm obliged to ye fer yer opinion o' my honest 'pearance, an' so forth, an' I reckon it'll be healthy fer me ter keep out o' yer hands this time. Lordy! my life wouldn't be worth a cent if ye got yer paws onto me again. Must feel

my way awful keerful now, or I'll git my mammy's best boy inter th' wu'st consarned diffikilty he was ever in."

The boy was indeed in great danger and little suspected the awful fate that was awaiting him.

Could he have known what the next hour would bring forth, he could be excused had he then and there given up the case and left the house.

But he did not know, and so he remained. Indeed, perhaps he would have defied danger and remained, anyhow. He was brave and daring to the last degree.

A great deal more was said, but as no points were brought out that were new to Billy, or that will give the reader any insight into the dark plot, we will pass over them.

The lady finally rose and said:

"Well, Mr. Buryall," addressing the undertaker, "I suppose you are waiting for us, so we will attend you."

"If you please," said Buryall, with a bow, as he got up.

Broadway Billy had been keeping one eye upon the hall, in order not to let any one take him by surprise, and he now left the door and dodged back unobserved into the room where the coffin rested.

There he lost no time in getting behind the big chair as before.

A moment later the woman and the four men came in, closing the door behind them, and, as Billy noticed, locking it.

"This is rather a bad box ter be into," mused the boy, "but they sha'n't find me if they don't go pokin' 'round this corner. No fear that I'll tell 'em I'm here; sweet pertaters, no!"

Billy had dropped flat upon the floor, half-under the big chair, and by looking out under the coffin could see all that went on.

The light was turned up at once, and then the undertaker opened the bag he had brought.

"This," he remarked, "is ice."

This caused the others to laugh, and Billy thought they did not conduct themselves as persons should in the presence of the dead.

In a moment he saw the joke.

The undertaker took from the bag several large and heavy stones.

What could be the meaning of this?

"Are you sure you have guessed the right weight?" the woman asked.

"There's no guess-work about it," the undertaker answered. "I weighed them; and, taken all together, they weigh just a hundred and twenty pounds."

"That is the right weight. And now can you fit them into the coffin so they will remain in place? It would be dreadful to have one of them move when the coffin is being handled."

"Oh! we will take care of that, hey, my friends?" turning to Ketcham and Carter.

"We will, of course," they responded.

Billy now began to see light ahead in the case.

These evil-minded persons were planning to have a mock burial of the very girl whom they had so recently incarcerated in the private mad-house.

"Go it, my beauties," the boy said to himself, "but don't forget to count me in. If I don't upset yer little game it'll be 'cause I can't. If I don't wake up yer ideas at th' time o' th' funeral to-morrow, call me a Dutchman. If I don't spin a yarn ter Inspector Br— Hello! they're openin' th' coffin."

Having moved the stones where they would be handy, the undertaker now began to take the lid from the coffin.

In a few minutes it was done.

Then, strange as it may seem, the light shone through the coffin, through several holes in the bottom and sides.

This proved that it was empty, and Billy wondered what the holes were for.

He noticed, too, that there were several smaller ones in the lid, catching the light through them as the undertaker removed it.

This was something for the boy to puzzle his brain over for a time.

Later on it would all be made clear.

The coffin opened, the undertaker, assisted by Carter and Ketcham, began to put in the stones, first wrapping them carefully in pieces of the old carpet.

While this was being done, Miss Harrington and Mr. Hoodley sat looking on in silence.

At last, after quite a little work, the stones were all in place, and so packed that there was no danger of their moving.

Then the lid of the coffin was put on, and this time it was screwed down tightly, evidently not to be again removed.

Billy saw that they were done; but, contrary to his expectations, they did not at once leave the room. Instead, they began a conversation that gave the boy the key to the whole mystery.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT BILLY OVERHEARD.

BEFORE recording what the young detective heard, it may not be out of place to say a few words regarding the Harrington family.

Stanton Harrington, now dead, had married twice, and had two children—one by his first wife and one by the second.

The second wife, too, was now dead.

Both the children were girls, and there was a difference of four years in their ages.

The first-born was now twenty-two, and her name was Irene. The younger, the one now said to be dead, was Vina, a pretty girl of eighteen.

Stanton Harrington had been rich, and after his death it was found that he had made his will thus:

The property was not to be divided until Vina became eighteen, and then it was to go to her and Irene in equal parts. In the event of either dying, childless, before that time, then the whole of the property was to go to the other.

Neither of the girls had yet married, and Vina's birthday was now near at hand.

Death, however, has stepped in at the last hour, and Vina, as it is reported, is no more. All through the day her friends have been dropping in, and have seen her silent form lying in the coffin, pale and cold in death. And on the morrow the funeral is to take place.

Vina had a lover, one Harvey Baldwin, who has been away from home for some weeks on a Western trip. He is expected home soon, but it is not thought he can arrive in time for the funeral.

Irene, too, has a lover—Joseph Hoodley, by name—and she and he are present in the room with Buryall, Ketcham and Carter, and all are concerned in the bold piece of villainous work of which we write.

When Buryall had set home the last screw in the coffin-lid, he said:

"There, the job is done."

"Are you quite sure it is well done?" inquired Miss Harrington.

"It could not be done better," was the reply.

"Not one of the stones can move an inch."

"And you are sure of the weight?"

"Yes, as I have already assured you."

"Then I do not see how we can fail in our plans," Irene observed.

"No, nor I," said Carter.

"Now, gentlemen," said Joseph Hoodley, as he straightened up with an air of business, "let us have a final talk and a final understanding."

"Quite correct," remarked Ketcham. "We must understand one another perfectly, and we must all understand all the points of the case."

"Unless we do," put in Carter, "we are liable to make a mess of it."

"Quite right," assented Hoodley, "quite right; and now let us go over the whole ground."

"And," said Irene, "let there not be the slightest point left unguarded."

"In the first place," began Hoodley, addressing the three hired rascals, "you are bound to me by ties you cannot and dare not break. Is this not so?"

"It is so," the three answered.

"And, for the sum of five thousand dollars each, you have agreed to help Miss Harrington and me in this work."

"We have," said Carter, speaking for them all.

"And you know," continued Hoodley, "that if one of us fail we all fail. If one does not play his part well, all must suffer."

The three men nodded.

"And you know, too," Hoodley went on, "that if we are found out we will be sent to State's Prison—perhaps for life."

Again they nodded.

"Therefore, you see how very important it is for us to have a perfect understanding. To that end, Miss Harrington and I have let you into the secret in full, so that you will understand just what is required of you, knowing what is at stake. We must win or we must fail, and, whichever it prove, we must stand or fall together. You understand that, I presume?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Very well; and now for the particulars of the case again. You know what Stanton Har-

rington's will was, and it will not be necessary to mention that. I will come to the vital points of the scheme at once. In the first place, by the terms of the will, if either of the daughters died before the younger became of age, all the wealth was to go to the other. And it is upon this that our plot hinges. Irene has no love for her half-sister, and, with my assistance, she has put her out of the way in order to come in for all of the property."

Broadway Billy could hardly keep quiet, dangerous as his position was.

"Sweet pertaters!" he mentally exclaimed, "but didn't I know it? If this ain't th' wu'st consarned diffikilty I've seen in two ages or more. There's goin' ter be a tremenjous racket, there is; about 'twixt right an' wrong, an' I'm goin' ter boost up th' right ter git there, we bet! If 'pearances goes fer anything, it's goin' ter be a mighty hot racket, too. Lordy! if I don't make 'em think there's a howlin' cyclone broke loose it won't be my fault. I'll lay th' hull case afore Inspector Br— This ain't no time to plan, though; I must listen now an' think after."

"We have had no idea or intention of killing the girl, however, as you know," the rascal went on. "We had no intention or desire to take murder upon ourselves. Instead, we hit upon a better and safer scheme, and one that answers the purpose just as well. Your part in the game, Doctor Ketcham, is to be mentioned first."

The doctor nodded, and taking that part of the recital upon himself, said:

"Yes, my part came first. For many weeks I have been 'doctoring' the young woman, and under my careful treatment she grew weaker day by day until two days ago, when she died. Then my friend, Mr. Buryall, was called in."

"Quite right," said the undertaker. "I came with this coffin, and made every preparation for a funeral."

Hoodley now took hold again.

"Such are the facts," he said. "You, doctor, did your work so well that for two whole days the young woman has been, in point of fact, like one dead. All day yesterday she was seen in her coffin, and no one could suspect that she was not dead. The deception has been perfect."

"And during that time," interrupted Carter, "I had my part to perform. I had to find a private mad-house, where, by paying well, a certain young woman whom we know could be placed. And once there, she would be as one dead."

"So far all has worked well," continued Hoodley. "To-night the girl came out of her trance-like sleep, we took her away at once, and she is now, you tell me, safe in Madam Winchester's mad-house."

"She is there, safe enough," declared Carter. "And we took her such a roundabout way that she cannot possibly guess where she is."

"And as for escape," added Ketcham, "that is quite out of the question."

"Well, we will consider her as out of the way," Hoodley went on. "And now comes another difficult part to play. To-morrow the funeral has to be held, and the coffin must not be opened again. It is for you, Buryall, to look out for that."

"Oh! I will take care of that," the undertaker declared confidently. "I will announce that a sudden change has taken place in the girl's appearance, and that the coffin cannot be opened."

"You must be prepared for Baldwin," said Irene. "He may arrive to-morrow in time to attend the funeral, and if he does he will be sure to demand to be allowed to see the corpse." "He cannot see it," returned Buryall, determinedly, "for the coffin shall not be opened again. If he insists upon it I will refer him to Miss Harrington."

"And I," said Irene, "will deny him the privilege of seeing her. If necessary, I can say that the doctor has forbid the opening of the coffin again."

"Perhaps," suggested Hoodley, "an order from the doctor not to open the coffin again would be good to have."

"That would not do," said Ketcham.

"Why not?" Hoodley demanded. "Because, the only reason I could give would be danger of infection, for some cause or other, and all the girl's friends know well enough that the coffin is full of holes."

"True enough; I did not think of that."

"Another piece of Vina's silly work," said Irene, in a tone of disgust. "She always had a horror of being buried alive, and made me promise, in the presence of several persons, that I would have plenty of holes put in her coffin to

admit air, and that I would have the coffin left in a vault for at least a week, if possible."

"And there is another source of danger," remarked Carter. "Suppose some one opens the coffin while it is in the vault."

"We must run the risk of that," said Hoodley. "That is something we cannot help."

"I will take care that the coffin is not left there many days, though," declared the undertaker.

"Have we considered every point now?" asked Irene.

"I believe we have," answered Hoodley. "I can think of nothing else at present. You will continue to explain that it was Vina's request that no one should be employed to sit up with her body, and do all in your power to close the eyes of the servants. To-morrow your grief must be something terrible."

"Oh! I will take care of all that. I have invented a hundred falsehoods to use if necessary."

"Then there is nothing more to be done to-night, and we may as well go."

"Yes, I think so. Gather up your things, Mr. Buryall," Irene directed, "and I will close and lock the room."

The undertaker picked up his tools, and in a moment they were ready to leave the room.

Their conversation had been carried on in low tones, and it would have been impossible for any one outside the room to hear them.

Broadway Billy, though, had taken in every word, eagerly.

It was a worse case than he had ever dreamed of finding.

"Sweet pertaters!" he mentally exclaimed, "but this does beat all! It's enough ter make angels weep. Who would ever think that such a fine-lookin' woman could be sich a deep-dyed villain! I'm beginnin' ter lose faith in th' hull human race. If this little plot ain't somethin' jest awful, then I'll sell my boots. Th' idee o' puttin' her sister inter a mad-house, then have a mock-funeral over her ter make believe she's dead, jest ter git th' hull o' th' old man's boodle. Ugh! it makes my flesh creep ter look at her. Jest hold on, though, my pesky critters, an' see who holds th' best trump on th' last round. William o' Broadway is inter this game, clear up to his ears, an' if he don't make a rattlin' among th' dry bones ye kin call his name Mud. Jest clear th' coast an' let me out here, an' I'll be at Police Headquarters as soon as th' sun is up. I'll put th' hull thing right onter Inspector Br—"

Just at that instant the boy felt an uncontrollable desire to sneeze, and, do what he would, he could not hold it back. He clapped both hands over his nose and mouth, and held on desperately, but, despite all his efforts, out came a startling sneeze—"Ab-choo!"

CHAPTER VIII. BILLY'S PERIL.

IMAGINE the result of that untimely sneeze. Ketcham, Carter and Buryall were just moving toward the door; Irene was following them; and Hoodley was waiting to turn out the light.

The instant they heard the sneeze they all stopped short, and Buryall let his tools fall to floor in his alarm.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy exclaimed in thought, "but I'm in fer it now."

He remained perfectly quiet, however, hoping that he might yet escape detection.

But his hope was useless, for the sneeze had been only too loud and genuine.

"What was that?" demanded Buryall in quick alarm.

"Didn't you sneeze?" questioned Ketcham.

"No."

"It came from the coffin," declared Irene, trembling with excitement and fear.

"It certainly did come from that direction," avowed Hoodley.

"So I thought, too," agreed Carter.

For a moment they all stood and looked at one another in silent wonder.

"It is very strange," said Irene presently, "for there is certainly no one here but us five."

All looked around sharply.

Billy drew himself as far back into his corner as possible, and almost held his breath.

It was, for him, a trying moment.

"There are few places here where a person could conceal himself," Hoodley reflected.

"Perhaps it was a cat," suggested the doctor.

"Ah! perhaps you are right," agreed the undertaker. "Let's look around."

"But," objected Irene, "we have no cat in the house."

"One may have got in from the street, though," insisted the doctor.

"Well, if no one of us five sneezed," Hoodley resumed, "the noise was made by some other person or thing. Come, we will search the room."

Billy saw that he was certain to be found now. Still he remained quiet.

All five of the evil plotters began to look around, moving chairs and other articles of furniture, and Hoodley and the undertaker moved toward the corner where the boy was.

They passed around the coffin, one at each end, and both looked behind the big chair at the same time.

"Thunder!"

"Furies!"

Such were their exclamations.

"What is it?" asked the others.

"This is what it is," answered Hoodley, and reaching down he caught hold of Billy's arm and pulled him out in no gentle manner.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed the boy, "I hope ye won't pull out my arm, mister; I've only got two, and I can't spare one nohow. What's all th' jolly row about, anyhow? How kem I here? How long hev I been asleep? How—"

"Shut up!" hissed Hoodley, giving him a rough shaking.

Billy was pretty badly frightened, but he had a remarkable nerve, and was as cool as usual.

As for Carter and Ketcham, they could only look on in open-mouthed amazement.

"What are you two staring at?" demanded Hoodley, as he noticed them. "Do you know him?"

"It is the same boy we met at Madam Winchester's," answered Carter.

"The same boy!"

"Yes," agreed Ketcham, "it is the same boy."

"How came he here, then?"

The two men shook their heads.

"How came you here?" Hoodley asked, as he gave his prisoner another hard shaking.

"Well, that's just what I'm tryin' ter git through my hair," answered Billy. "How did I come here? It's a puzzler ter me, an' I give it up."

"What! you young whelp, do you mean to tell me you do not know how you came here?" Hoodley grated.

"Such is about th' fact," returned Billy. "If you kin shed any light onter th' case I'd be most happy ter have ye do so. Say, what's been goin' on here, anyhow? Lord! and the boy gave a start of pretended surprise as he turned his eyes toward the coffin, "somebody dead?"

"You are doing well, my lad," said Carter, as he advanced and laid his hand upon Billy's other shoulder, "but it won't work. We have seen you before, and your game has come to an end. You are an infernal young spy."

Buryall had been eying the young detective keenly, and he now spoke.

"Say," he announced, "I know that little imp!"

"You do?" from all.

"Yes, I do; and he is one of the worst little bloodhounds in the whole city. He is a detective, out and out, and is in with the police. He did a bad job for a friend of mine once, and I vowed then I'd fix him for it if I had to wait ten years."

Billy's doom was sealed.

Every one present looked pale and determined, and the boy plainly saw that he was in a bad fix.

For some moments no one spoke.

"Well, what are we to do?" Ketcham finally asked.

"This boy must die," added Hoodley, in a fierce, earnest whisper.

"No, not that," objected the woman; "I will not agree to that. He must be disposed of in some other way."

"There is no other way," decided Hoodley. "He knows our secrets, and he shall not leave this house alive. Here, Carter, gag and bind him."

Hoodley and Ketcham held the boy so that he could not move, and in a few moments Carter and Buryall had him securely gagged and bound.

It was not by any means the first time the lad had been in the same fix, but this time he felt that it was to be his last adventure.

But he did not give up hopes. He had escaped before from frightful dangers, and perhaps he would escape again.

There was no denying, though, that he was in deadly peril.

"Now," Hoodley questioned, "how are we to dispose of him?"

"There is but one way," answered Ketcham; "he must die."

"No, no," pleaded the woman; "there must be no murder done. That will place us all in danger of our lives. You must find some other way."

"We have no choice in the matter," Hoodley returned. "He *must* die. He knows our secret, and while he lives we are not safe."

"Yes, he must and he *shall* die," the undertaker added. "He shall not leave this house alive."

The woman covered her face with her hands. "It is terrible," she moaned. "I am almost sorry now I ever planned the thing at all. *Must* he die? *Must* we have blood upon our hands?"

"It will not be upon yours," assured Hoodley, shortly.

"And the crime need never be known," added Ketcham.

"Well, *how* is he to be disposed of?" demanded Carter. "We have no time to fool about the matter."

Hoodley thought. "You must give him a dose of poison, doctor," he finally suggested, in a tone of command, "and as soon as he is dead we will bury him in the cellar. Our safety depends—"

"No, *no*!" implored Irene, "not that, not that! I would not stay in the house another night!"

"It cannot be done that way," added the doctor, "for I have no poison with me."

"And it is certain that no blood must be spilled," observed Carter.

Billy, now lying on the floor in a helpless condition, heard his fate thus debated, and it must be confessed that his hopes were few.

There was another pause.

"We must hang him," Ketcham at length advised. "That will leave no tell-tale marks, and Buryall can take the body to the Morgue. He can tell some story about finding it in some place or other; or, better still, we can hang the lad in some out-of-the-way place, and leave him there."

"And run the risk of being caught in the act," objected Hoodley. "Oh, no, I thank you! The boy must die in this room, and the body must be disposed of in this house."

Irene Harrington threw herself upon a chair, pale, trembling, weeping.

She had a bad heart, but murder was beyond her. The horror of that crime unnerved her. She did not seem to realize that in putting her sister in a mad-house, there to die by degrees, was only murder of another kind, and even more horrible.

"He must *not* be killed," she insisted.

"But," urged Hoodley, impatiently, "think what we have at stake. If we do not kill him now, while he is in our power, we will not be safe for a moment."

"Perhaps we can buy his silence," the woman suggested.

"No, we can't," declared the undertaker. "I know something about Broadway Billy, and—"

"What!" exclaimed Ketcham, "is this the boy we have heard so much about of late?"

"It is that very vagabond sleuth!"

"All the more reason, then, why he should not escape us," counseled Hoodley.

"Ha!" Buryall suddenly exclaimed, "I have an idea."

"What is it?" queried Hoodley.

"Let us remove the stones from the coffin and put him in."

"It won't do," Hoodley decided at once. "He could move or groan, no matter how tightly we bound him, and would explode the whole game."

"I can fix that," averred Ketcham.

"How?"

"I can give him a sleeping potion, as I happen to have some with me, and he will sleep twenty-four hours, just as the girl did."

"Ah! that is better," Hoodley assented.

"Into the coffin he shall go. It is about the only plan we have, and it is a good one. After the funeral Buryall can attend to the matter. Once we get him into the vault, all will be well."

Broadway Billy's hair seemed fairly to stand on end, and a cold perspiration appeared upon his face. There did not seem to be a shadow of hope now.

Doctor Ketcham took a little bottle from his pocket, shook its contents, and looked at it toward the light.

"There is enough of it," he announced, "and let us lose no time in getting it into him."

CHAPTER IX.

A HORRIBLE FATE.

THERE is no denying the fact that Billy's situation was now desperate indeed.

He had placed himself in the hands of men who would show him no mercy.

And well did he realize his danger.

"Sweet pertaters!" was his mental exclamation, "I guess it's all up with me, this time. Seems ter me I kin feel th' awful grip o' death onter my breathin' machine. I guess it's all up wi' me, an' my battle won't amount to shucks. I guess Willyum o' Broadway has played his last game, an' is about ter be boxed up. I hate th' idee o' bein' beat by sich a pesky set o' rascals, but I s'pose it's th' fortune o' war. Well, thank goodness I've got a boodle in th' bank, an' mom is provided fer. Wish they'd give me a chance ter send her a good-by, but th' chances is they won't. Hello! th' doctor is gettin' out his p'izen."

The doctor, having shaken the contents of the little bottle, prepared to pour the stuff into the boy's mouth.

"Come, Carter," he directed, "get that gag out of his mouth for a moment."

Carter and Buryall hastened to obey.

"If you make a sound you little imp," Carter threatened, while he was removing the gag, "I'll knock your head off."

"And I'll put my heel on your neck," supplemented Buryall.

In a moment the gag was out of the boy's mouth, and the doctor stood all ready to pour the drug down his throat when Billy gave vent to a yell that would have done credit to a wild Indian.

"Thunder!" cried Carter, as he slapped his hand over the boy's mouth, "what did you do that for?"

Buryall snatched up one of his tools and, but for Hoodley, would have hit him on the head.

"Hold!" commanded Hoodley, "do not strike him; he might bleed like a stuck pig."

The undertaker, with muttered curses, laid the tool down.

"What is to be done now?" questioned Carter.

"I'll show you," hissed Ketcham. "Here, Buryall, hold this bottle, and when I give the word, pour the stuff into his mouth."

Buryall took the bottle, and Ketcham took charge of Billy.

With one hand he clutched the boy's throat, and with the other closed his nose so that he would have to open his mouth in order to breathe.

Billy tried to cry out again, but could not do so.

Ketcham held on tightly, and in a moment the boy had to open his mouth to gasp for breath.

Then the doctor directed the undertaker to pour in the drug.

Buryall did so, and as soon as it was well into the boy's throat the doctor released his hold a little.

Billy was now gasping for air, and the moment the doctor's hand relaxed a little, down the drug went.

The boy had been powerless to resist.

Ketcham then told Carter to replace the gag, and in a few minutes the boy was as helpless as he had been before.

"I reckon it's all up now," he mused. "They've got their nasty dose inter me, an' no doubt I'll soon be asleep. An' I reckon I won't wake up ag'in, either. I wish I'd taken Skinny's advice an' not poked my nose inter other folks' affairs, an' then I wouldn't be here. I couldn't help it, though, no more'n I could fly. I have got ter do somethin' when th' fever breaks out on me, or I'd bu'st. But I guess th' fever will be cured this time, an' so will I. Wonder what Inspector Br— Hello! somebody is comin'."

True enough, steps were heard coming along the hall, and in a moment more there came a knock at the door.

"Curse it!" hissed Hoodley, "who can that be?"

"It must be a servant, alarmed by the cry the boy gave," answered Irene. "I will see."

She went to the door and opened it just a little.

It was one of the servants, as she had supposed.

"What is the matter?" the servant asked. "I thought I heard some one scream."

"It was I," answered Irene.

"You?"

"Yes. The undertaker has just closed the coffin over my poor sister, and I came in to see her before he did so, and the change in her appearance was so startling that it caused me to cry out. You may return to bed."

"Has the body changed, then?"

"Yes, very much. We shall not be able to open the coffin to-morrow."

"Oh! that is dreadful."

"Yes, it is indeed."

"And can I do anything, Miss Harrington?"

"No nothing. If you are wanted I will call you. Return to bed."

The servant turned away, and Irene closed the door and turned to her accomplices with a smile.

"How was that?" she grinned.

"It was fine," Hoodley complimented. "You have played well the first card of to-morrow's game."

"You certainly have," added the doctor.

"The information will be passed from servant to servant, and it will be no news by the time the funeral takes place."

"It was a splendid stroke!" exclaimed Buryall.

"Well, come," urged Hoodley, "we must get the stones out of the coffin and the boy into it as soon as possible."

"That is so," agreed Carter, "for the hour is late."

Broadway Billy listened to every word. He was beginning to feel the effects of the drug, and was growing sleepy. He was anxious to know his fate, awful as it was.

"I am more in favor of getting him out of the house at once, if it can be done," said Irene.

"It can't be done, safely," Hoodley opposed.

"It required all our cunning to get the girl cut, without creating suspicion. We might get him out, and then run right into the arms of a policeman. No, it won't do. This is the only plan open to us."

"Mr. Hoodley is right," the doctor supported.

"This plan is the best."

Buryall was already at work taking the lid from the coffin.

After some minutes this was done, and then the stones were carefully removed.

Billy was by this time almost gone. He could hardly keep his mind fixed upon what was going on, and the voices of his enemies sounded far away.

The last he remembered was of being lifted up and placed in the coffin, and of seeing the lid placed over him. After that, all was blank for many hours.

The boy once in the coffin, Buryall lost no time in replacing the lid and setting home the screws.

"T ere," he said, as he gave the final turn to the last screw; "he is boxed. Now the coffin is sealed for good and all."

"And what about the stones?" asked the woman.

"They must be disposed of," Hoodley decided.

"And it is little less difficult to dispose of them than of the boy," remarked Carter.

"The only difference is," observed Buryall, "they are in several pieces, while the boy was all in one lump."

"Is there any place in the house where we can put them out of sight for the present?" asked Hoodley.

"I do not want them left in the house," objected Irene.

"They will have to be left here, if we cannot get them away," Hoodley said, decisively.

"Well," returned Irene, "I do not know where they can be put. The servants will be certain to find them, and such a find, in this house, would lead to much talk. No; they positively must be taken out."

"You are right," Hoodley admitted; "I did not think of that part of it. What can be done, Buryall?"

"Bury all would be a good plan," interrupted Carter, with a weak attempt at a pun, "if we only had some place to bury them."

"You ought to be ashamed to attempt a pun on such a solemn occasion," protested Buryall, putting on a funeral air.

And then he added:

"I think we can manage it. We will all leave the house together, and your carriage is waiting, is it not?" to Carter.

"Yes, it is waiting," Carter answered.

"Well, there are but six of the stones in all, and we can take them out and put them into the carriage, hiding them under the seats. They are likely to lie there for weeks before the driver will discover them."

"But," objected Hoodley, "the driver will see them."

"He will not suspect. The largest two I will carry in the bag, and the others you can put under your coats until you get into the carriage."

"Well, we will try it. They must be disposed of in some way, and I can think of no better plan."

Buryall put the two heavier ones into the bag, together with all the odds and ends of carpet with which they had been fitted into the coffin, and the other men selected from the others to carry.

When they were ready, Hoodley said: "Now, we must not forget what is to be done to-morrow. The main part of the task falls to Buryall, though Miss Harrington's part may prove by no means easy to play. The one important point is—do not let the coffin be opened."

"Rest assured that it shall not be," the undertaker promised.

"And be sure, too, that I shall not fail in my part," Irene assured, decidedly.

No more was to be said, and after Buryall had given one final look around, to see that he was leaving everything in good order, they left the room.

Miss Harrington waited behind a moment to turn out the light, and then she followed and locked the door after her.

After a few whispered words, then, the men left the house and Irene entered the room on the other side of the hall.

When she was alone she threw herself upon a chair with a smile of triumph.

"At last!" she said half aloud to herself, "all is to be mine, and I can bestow it all upon the man I love. I was more than half afraid to mention the scheme to him at first, but Joseph Hoodley is no fool and he gave me his assistance at once. My baby-faced sister—or half-sister, (and how I hate her!) is well disposed of, and my path is clear. To-morrow she will be buried as everybody will believe, and then all will be over. Ha, ha, ha! I have it all, all. While she is pining away in the mad-house, I shall be living like a queen, having everything my own way."

In this strain she continued to run on for some time, but at length she rose and locked the house and retired to her room.

And in the coffin in the lonely room below, lay Broadway Billy, bound, gagged, and unconscious. He was like one dead.

Would he escape? or would the evil plotters carry their scheme to the end?

If no one interfered on the morrow, the coffin would certainly be taken to the vault, and, later on, and perhaps while the boy was still alive the undertaker would have it buried.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER HAND IN THE GAME.

SKINNY, Broadway Billy's slim and slender partner, was just opening the corner-stand for business next morning, when Mrs. Weston, Billy's mother, appeared.

"Skinny," she inquired, "where in the world is Billy?"

"Give it up, ma'm," Skinny answered. "He started off last night, all on a suddint, ter do some detective work, an' he hain't got back yet."

"Oh, my! and perhaps he has got into trouble. I do wish he would give up such work and attend to business."

"So do I," Skinny avowed, "but I'm 'fraid he won't. When th' fever breaks out on him he's jest no good at all. As I was thinkin' last night, I expect nothin' else than some o' these days he'll be gettin' killed, an' I'll have ter drape our stand wi' mournin' fer him. He wants a good talkin' to, does Billy."

"It is no use talkin' to him," declared Mrs. Weston, "for he is bound to have his own way anyhow. He is a good boy, but he causes me a deal of worry. Can't you tell me where he went?"

"Haven't th' slightest idee, ma'm."

Skinny rattled on then, and told her all he knew about the matter.

"Well, I suppose he will come home again, as usual, if he don't get killed," the woman reflected, "and I may as well content myself until he arrives. I don't wish him any bad luck, goodness knows, but I do hope that some time he'll get such a scare that he will be glad to keep himself out of other people's affairs in future."

"That's jest where th' pain is," declared Skinny. "Billy is a boy that can't be scared off. Nothin' short o' bein' killed will ever cure him, I'm afraid."

While they were talking, a man came up and stopped at the stand.

Skinny recognized him at once as a friend of Billy's.

This man was one Speare, a detective who sometimes employed Billy to lend him a little assistance in parts where Billy could do better work than he could himself.

"Where is Billy this morning?" he asked.

"That's what we an' his mother here would like ter know," Skinny replied.

Speare looked at Mrs. Weston, lifting his hat as he asked:

"Are you Billy's mother?"

"Yes, sir," the woman replied.

"Then," said Speare, "I must congratulate you. Your boy is one of the wisest little fellows for his years this city can show, and is bound to make his mark. He is as smart as lightning."

"Thank you, sir," returned the widow, blushing with pride.

"And you say you don't know where Billy is?" turning again to Skinny.

"No, sir, I don't. He got th' fever onto him again last night, an' no knowin' what sort o' a scrape he's got inter by this time."

"The 'fever'—what do you mean by that?"

"Th' detective fever."

"Oh! I see. Then he is working up another case, is he?"

"Yes, I s'pose so. He got his eye onto what he thought might be a diffikilty last night an' off he went."

At this point Mrs. Weston interrupted to take her leave, saying she would go home, and requesting Skinny to send Billy to her as soon as he came.

When she was gone, Skinny gave Speare the particulars of Billy's going off.

As they were talking a carriage came down Broadway, turned into the cross-street where the two were standing, and came to a stop only a few yards from them.

Skinny, glancing at it casually, gave a sudden start.

The detective noticed it at once, and asked:

"What did you see?"

"That carriage," said Skinny.

"What about it?"

"It's th' very one Billy follered off, or I'm a bow-legged tailor."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Why, I noticed it last night when Billy called my 'tention to it."

"How could you see it in the dark?—that is, so as to remember it?"

"Oh! it wasn't dark, ye know, owin' to th' 'lectric lights."

"That is so. And you are sure it is the same one?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it now. It's the same horses, anyhow, an' th' same driver, too."

"Good enough! I will have a little talk with the gentleman presently."

While they were talking the driver got down, opened his carriage, and began to dust it out.

The detective and Skinny watched him.

Presently, much to their surprise, he began to swear like a pirate.

"Wonder what's cuttin' him up so?" Skinny questioned.

"Something has gone wrong," the detective inferred.

Out from under the seats of his carriage the driver drew several stones of good size.

He was as mad as a hornet, as the saying goes, and if swearing would have created a fog, it would have rivalled anything ever seen in London.

The detective went forward, in an idle way, and asked:

"What seems to be the trouble, my friend?"

The driver glared at him like an untamed savage.

"What's th' matter?" he repeated; "there's matter enough! Some gun-blasted son of a red-head soap-b'iler has been fillin' my carriage full o' pavin' stones! Jest look here, an' here."

"Well, that is rather a rough joke," the detective agreed.

"Rough! well I should say so."

"But, there's no damage done, is there?"

"No, I guess not; but, dang me if wouldn't like ter know who done it, an' I'll bet I'd get even wi' him."

"Well, I wouldn't care so long as no damage is done. No doubt you will find out who did it, and then you can get even with him."

"If I do, I will, you bet!"

"It seems to me I'd ought to know you," the detective reflected; "where have I seen you?"

The driver glanced at him more closely.

"Don't know as I ever seen you," he returned, "but, mebbly I have. Mebbly I've druv ye somewheres sometime."

"That must be it. And what will you charge to take me up to the Fifth Avenue Hotel now?"

"A dollar."

"All right, we'll go. No objections to my riding on the box, have you?"

"No, if ye want ter ride there; but I reckon th' inside is better."

"I prefer the box."

"All right, git right up there, an' as soon as I get these stone out we'll be off."

The detective mounted the box, and the driver, taking the several stones from the carriage, deposited them slyly in a row on the edge of the curb.

As soon as they were out he sprung up beside his passenger, gave the word to his horses, and they started, the detective giving a nod at Skinny as they turned around into Broadway.

"I guess you were out late last night," the detective presently remarked.

The driver looked up quickly.

"What makes you think so?" he demanded.

"Why, your horses seem just a trifle rusty, and you look a little sleepy."

"Well, you've hit it about right," the Jehu confessed; "I was out a little late."

"I thought so. I— Ah! now I guess I remember where I saw you."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Where was it?"

"In front of the — Hotel, about ten o'clock last night."

The driver bestowed another very searching look upon his passenger, but the detective was looking intently at the horses.

"I was there about that time," the driver confessed.

"Of course you were," in a matter-of-fact sort of way. "I could not recall at first where it was I saw you, but now I remember well enough. I was in the reading-room at the time, looking out the window, we will suppose. You drew up and stopped before the hotel, and presently a man came out and got into your carriage and you then went away up Broadway."

"That's correct," owned the driver; "you've got it all down pat."

"And, from what could be seen, you had a lively female passenger aboard, too," the detective ventured.

"Say," demanded the driver, abruptly, "was there anything ye didn't see?"

The detective laughed.

"Oh! yes," he returned, "plenty of things, I suppose, but I saw about all that took place while you were in front of the hotel."

"I should say ye did!"

"What was the matter with the young woman?" Speare openly asked.

"Crazy."

"Crazy, eh? I thought perhaps there was some crooked work going on. It was none of my business, though, and I know enough to keep my nose out of affairs that do not concern me."

"That's more than a good many folks can say."

"Yes, I suppose so. You took the young woman to an asylum, I presume?"

"No."

"No! Then she has friends who will care for her in private, no doubt."

"I s'pose so."

"And what became of the boy who caught on behind your carriage when you started from the hotel?"

Once more the driver roused up, and looked squarely at his passenger.

The detective was still looking at the horses.

"Did that cuss foller me from th' hotel?"

"You saw him, then?"

"Dast it, yes!"

"No doubt he was curious to know what was going on."

"Well, I hope he found out, but I don't believe he did."

"Did you know him?"

"No. I only seen him fer a minute, when they fired him out of th' house."

"Ah! he went to spying and got caught, did he? Served him right."

"I take it you ain't none too friendly to'rds spyers an' sich like," the driver remarked, inquisitively.

The detective gave him a nudge, and bestowed upon him a smile and a wink that, to the driver's mind, spoke volumes.

"I thought so," the driver commented.

The detective laughed.

"You thought I was no friend to the police, eh?"

"You're right."

"And I suppose you drivers have to be mighty careful what kind of work you are doing, don't you?"

"Oh! we never know anything. We do our work and take our fares, and then we forget all

about it. We minds our own business, we does. We don't hear nothin' or see nothin', an', of course, we don't know nothin'."

"Ha, ha, ha! I see. And if the police were to ask about that young lady, you wouldn't be able to remember her at all."

"That's about it. Ye see, I took her to a house in Wooster street, but if they went to askin' me I wouldn't be able to remember th' name of th' street fer th' life of me."

"And that was the house the boy was fired out of?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him again?"

"Yes, I seen him again up-town, where he went into th' other house, and— But, what are you interested in that boy for?"

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING QUESTION.

DETECTIVE SPEARE was trying hard to draw the driver out, but was not meeting with great success.

And now the driver was growing a little suspicious.

The detective saw that he must say something to allay suspicion, and must take more care not to arouse it again.

"Oh!" he returned carelessly, "I was only t'inkin' perhaps he was hired by somebody to watch what was going on."

"No, I guess not," the driver opposed, "If he was spyin' at all I guess he was doin' it on his own account."

"Well, it makes no difference to me, anyhow," declared the detective, "and I guess I better keep still or you will begin to think I am prying into affairs that do not concern me. Say! pull up here and let's go in and have something. I'm dry."

As Speare spoke he pointed at a saloon of the better class which they were approaching.

The driver obeyed, nothing loth, and when the carriage stopped they both sprung down.

"There is nothing stuck up about me," assumed the detective, "and when I like a fellow I want him to know it. Come right in and let us smile."

"Well, hang me if you ain't a team," the astonished driver declared in turn, "an' I'm proud ter do as you say."

The driver could trust his team alone for a few moments, and they entered the saloon.

The detective called for liquor of the best, and told the driver to name his choice.

"Oh!" the latter exclaimed, "I'm no darned hog, I ain't, an' what's good enough for you won't go ag'in' me, I reckon. I'll take the same."

And so they drank; and not only once, but twice.

The detective settled the score, and as they passed out he remarked:

"That is the stuff that goes to a man's toes, and makes life worth living."

"You're right," echoed the driver, as he wiped his mouth upon his sleeve, "an' I'm heartily 'bliged to ye."

They returned to the box, and the carriage rolled on.

"That is what puts new blood into a fellow when he's out late, too," the detective continued.

"You're right again," the driver returned. "A little of it last night wouldn't ha' gone bad."

"You didn't get any, eh?"

"Not a darn smell."

"Well, that was hardly fair. Now, I and my pals never go round at night without keeping our driver warm."

"I'd like ter be yer driver, then."

"Well, no doubt I'll be able to give you a job some time. Where do you hang up?"

The driver gave his name and address, of which the detective made a careful mental note. "You said you were out quite late, I believe?" he remarked.

"Yes; I guess it was two o'clock before I put up my team."

"On the go most of the time?"

"Well, yes and no. Ye's see there was a good deal of waitin'."

"I see. I wouldn't like that."

"No, nor I don't."

"No doubt you turned a clever penny, though, and covered a considerable number of miles."

"Well, yes, I was paid good enough, and went around and about for some miles, too."

The driver was becoming more willing to talk

freely, and the detective did not allow him any rest.

"You are out early, after being out so late," Speare remarked.

"I always am," was the reply. "I take good keer o' myself an' hosses, an' we're allus around on time in th' mornin'."

"Suppose you are out all night, though, how then?"

"Oh! well, then of course I take the day off, or part of it."

The detective could not seem to get at what he wanted.

He kept on, though, and as the driver became more open, he finally got him switched upon the right track.

"Talkin' about coverin' ground an' goin' round-about ways," he presently remarked, "I did some o' that last night."

"So?" the detective interrogated in an encouraging tone.

"Yes. Ye see I started from th' Fifth Avenue Hotel an' went up to West — street. Then from there clean down to th' — Hotel. From there right back to Union Square, an' then right back down into Wooster street, an' stopped not over half a mile from where I'd started from. That is what I call goin' around. Then from there right back to West — street, an' th' Lord only knows how much furdur."

"Well, that was something of a trip. I suppose you brought the crazy girl from West — street."

"Yes; an' then had ter go clean down to th' — Hotel to find her doctor—or was it th' lawyer?—somebody, anyhow."

"And, for all you know, that boy followed you all the way, from the very start."

"Jest as like as not; hang him!"

"And you say you last saw him at the West — street house."

"Yes; but he went right in there as though he lived there."

"Well, perhaps he does; but I just had a new idea in mind."

"An' what was that?"

"Why, I thought perhaps it was the boy who put the stones into your carriage, and he wanted to see the fun when you found them. These New York boys are terrors, and are up to all kinds of devilment."

"Mebby you are right," the driver reflected. "I'd like ter know for sure, an' then if I ever seen him again, you bet I'd hurt him some."

"No doubt you can find him easily enough, if you remember the number of that West — street house, and know the name of the family that lives there."

"I remember th' number, it was No. —; but I don't know the name of the family."

"Well, the Directory would tell you that. But, it is hardly worth while to bother with it, for your carriage was not damaged any."

"Mebby you're right, but I tell ye I was mad when I first found 'em."

"So I imagined from the remarks you made."

There was, of course, a great deal more of this conversation than we have recorded, and the carriage was now nearing its destination.

Speare had worked hard to gain the point of information he was after, but had now at last succeeded.

He wanted to know where Broadway Billy had last been seen.

Now he knew that the driver had seen him enter the house, No. — West — street, at a late hour, and he had not been seen since.

Speare was little interested in the matter concerning the crazy girl. All he wanted was to find Billy.

He had no suspicion, so far, that any harm had come to the boy.

When they arrived at the hotel, the detective handed the driver the sum agreed upon, and bade him good-day.

Just as Speare turned away, a man came out of the hotel, advanced to the driver, and in hurried tones asked:

"Are you disengaged?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Then take me to No. — West — street."

Speare heard and saw, and resolved to follow.

There was a cab standing at a little distance away, and the detective engaged it.

"Follow that carriage," he ordered, giving the cabman a glimpse of his badge, and into the cab he sprang.

The man he was following happened to be Joseph Hoodley.

Speare did not know him, but he was now interested in the house he had heard him direct the driver to, and meant to know more.

On up they went, the cabman keeping the carriage well in sight, and at last West — street was reached.

There the detective signaled his driver to stop, and got out.

The driver was not a little surprised to see an apparently old man getting out, instead of the young one who had got in.

Speare had put on a wig and beard, changing his appearance wonderfully.

Telling his cabman to wait for him, he went down the street toward where the carriage had now stopped, walking slowly.

He saw Hoodley get out and enter the house, and when he drew nearer he noticed also the crape on the door.

This made him doubt, for a moment, the carriage driver's story.

What possible business could Broadway Billy have had in this house at so late an hour?

The driver had declared that the boy had entered as though he belonged there.

Perhaps the one he had seen was not Billy at all.

When he reflected, though, just what a daring boy Billy was, he was ready to believe it was the driver he had seen.

He walked on past the house, slowly, and on to the next corner. Then he turned back.

He had been debating in his mind what to do, and had now decided.

As he turned back he saw Hoodley come out of the house again, enter the carriage, and drive away.

Of course he had no object in following him further.

When he reached the house again he ascended the steps, entered the outer door and knocked lightly at the inner one.

A servant opened it at once.

"I desire to see the master of the house," the detective said.

"The master of the house, sir, is Miss Harrington," the servant explained. "Do you desire to see her, sir?"

"Yes, for a moment, if I may."

The servant showed him into the parlor, and asked his name.

"You may tell your mistress a stranger desires to see her for a moment, on business."

The servant went out, and in a few moments Irene Harrington entered the room.

She was clad in deep mourning, and was evidently preparing for the funeral.

"You desire to see me?" she queried, as she entered.

"Yes," the detective answered, "and I hope you will pardon me for intruding at such a time. I came to inquire concerning a boy who entered this house about midnight last night, and— Why, madam, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

Irene had turned deathly pale, and had to grasp a chair for support.

"It—it is nothing," she gasped, pressing her hand to her side; "I am subject to such spells. There, it is over now."

She recovered almost as quickly as she had been overcome.

"A boy?" she interrogated a moment later; "let me see. I— Ah! yes, I remember, now; there was a boy came here with a message, quite late, but he went away again at once."

CHAPTER XII.

VINA IN THE MAD-HOUSE.

DETECTIVE SPEARE was puzzled.

What was it, he asked himself, that caused this fair woman such alarm for a moment when he mentioned the boy to her? Was something wrong?

Her answer, too, was anything but clear. What possible business could Broadway Billy have found to use as a pretext for entering the house?

Speare could not understand it.

It was possible that a messenger had called late in the evening, and that the woman knew nothing about Billy's coming, later; or it was possible that the driver had been mistaken; or— But, a hundred things could be thought of.

The woman's sudden paling, though, had but one explanation—to the detective's mind.

He could do nothing, though, but pass a few remarks and back out with as good a grace as possible.

"Did you know the boy?" he asked.

"Of course not," was the proud reply.

"Pardon me; I thought perhaps you had seen him before. You see the boy I am after has not been home all night, and was last seen here. I must try and trace him further if I can. Pardon me for intruding."

Again the woman's face grew pale for a moment, and she trembled visibly.

She soon recovered.

"I am sorry I can give you no information concerning him," she said, "but so it is."

"Well, I will go. May I inquire who is dead?" in a sad, sympathetic tone.

"It is my poor sister," Irene answered, bursting at once into tears.

"Believe me, I sympathize with you," the detective avowed. "It is hard to lose those whom we love."

"It is indeed, and more so when the person is one's only relative."

A few words more were exchanged, and then Speare departed.

He had learned—nothing; but he had a suspicion that the woman he had just left knew more than she cared to tell.

And as he thought it all over carefully, he began to see great complications and dangers for Billy in the "diffikilty" he had set out to unravel.

Speare, as we have said, wanted to find Billy because he wanted to use him. That, at least, was his first object, but now that the boy seemed to be missing, he wanted to learn what had become of him. He liked the boy, and if he was in danger he wanted to help him out.

He could do nothing more now, but if the boy did not turn up in a reasonable time, he would know where to begin a determined search for him.

He went back to the corner-stand, and there left word with Skinny for Billy to come to his office at noon, if he returned, and so, for the time, gave up the search.

Speare had been gone but a little time from the Harrington house when Hoodley returned, having only been away on a short errand.

He found Irene pacing the floor of the parlor, pale and trembling.

"What is the matter?" he asked in alarm.

"We are lost—lost!" the woman exclaimed.

"Lost?" repeated the rascal, sharing her alarm, "what do you mean by that?"

"I mean all that the word implies," the woman returned. "We are lost."

"But, Irene, explain what you mean," Hoodley urged, in no patient tone.

"A man has been here inquiring for the boy."

"Who was he?"

"I do not know; I never saw him before. He was a stranger to me."

"What did he say?"

"He said he had come to inquire concerning a boy who entered this house about midnight last night."

Hoodley's face grew dark and troubled.

"What could this mean?"

"And what did you say to him?" he asked.

"At first I did not know what to say, I was so startled; but I gained my coolness as quickly as I could and told him that a boy had called at a late hour with a message, and that he went away again at once. That was all I knew about him."

The rascal's face brightened a little.

"That was well done," he declared, "and I guess you have turned suspicion away. What are we supposed to know about boys?"

"It is more serious than you seem to think," said Irene, earnestly. "Who is this man? What is the boy to him? How does he know that the boy came to this house?"

"I cannot answer your questions," the man replied, "but of one thing be sure. The man does not know that the boy is in the coffin, nor is he likely to, and once the funeral is passed all right, we can defy him."

"But I am afraid the funeral will not pass off all right. Something seems to tell me we are now in more danger of discovery than we have ever been. I am afraid."

"Well, there is no turning back now," declared Hoodley, "and we are forewarned of danger ahead. So much the better. You must nerve yourself to play your part, and all will be well."

"Oh! I shall not fail to play my part," Irene vowed, determinedly, "and if failure comes it shall not be said that it was my fault."

"That is all you can do."

In the mean time Broadway Billy was lying in the coffin, bound, gagged, silent and unconscious.

But he was alive.

The arrangements for the funeral were going steadily forward, and at two o'clock it was to take place.

Would the boy be rescued before that time? It did not seem possible.

Everything seemed to favor the evil persons of whose dark schemes he was a victim.

And what of the poor girl who was locked in the dismal mad-house?

She was now up and dressed, in her narrow cell, but from the effects of the drugs that had been given her she was more than half ill, and her mind was confused.

She could not realize where she was, and of course it was of little use for her to ask her brutal attendants.

The cries, groans and prayers of the victims in the other cells came to her ears, and almost incessantly.

She called aloud for her sister, whom she loved, and against whom she had not the slightest suspicion, but of course her cries were not answered.

Where she was, she could not imagine, nor why she had been taken from home.

Her head ached, and her mind was confused. She could not think.

And so the dreary hours passed.

When noon came Madam Winchester went up to see her, with the servant who carried her dinner.

They found the girl seated upon the edge of the bed, staring blankly up at the miserable little window, which, by the way, was too high up for her to reach, as though wondering why it was so small and so high.

"Good-morning, my dear," said the proprietress, in her sweetest tone, not mindful of the fact that it was a rather late hour for that salutation; "how do I find you?"

Vina looked around in a stupid way, and asked:

"Where am I?"

"Why, my dear, you are here, in my house," answered the woman. "Do you not know me?"

"Where is my sister?" Vina questioned, paying no attention to what was asked.

"Your sister?" in a tone of surprise.

"Yes; where is she?"

"Why, you have no sister, my dear; you are my ward. Do you not remember?"

"No, I do not remember," responded Vina, pressing her hands to her head. "Who are you?"

"Why, I am Madam Winchester. You have been very ill, you know, and are just recovering. You have been placed in my care by your friends."

"I cannot understand it," spoke Vina, wearily. "I am Vina Harrington, and my home is at No. — West — street. I wish you would send for my sister."

"But, you have no sister, my dear," the woman repeated. "It is your poor little head that is playing you false again. Your mind wanders, you know."

"Yes, I have a sister," Vina urged; "I am not crazy, madam."

"It is your poor little head—poor little head," the woman repeated. "You have been very ill, and your mind is not quite right. You are not Miss Harrington, for she is dead."

Vina sprang to her feet with a scream.

"My sister dead!" she cried. "Oh! can it be true? Tell me it is not so."

"You had no sister," said the heartless woman; "your name is not Harrington; it is Vina Harrington who is dead!"

Vina stared at her in utter bewilderment.

"I am not Vina Harrington, you say?" she repeated.

"No, you are not. But, see what a tempting dinner we have brought you. Come and eat it, like a good dear, and you will soon be getting well."

"It is a lie—a lie!" screamed a voice from an adjoining cell, with fierce and startling earnestness. "They want to drive you mad! Do not believe them; they lie!"

Vina was startled, as well she might be, and Madam Winchester's face grew black with anger.

"Attend to her," she ordered, addressing the servant.

The servant went out at once, and was heard to enter the next door.

Then followed the sound of blows, accompanied with screams and groans.

"Oh! who is that? and what are they doing to her?" asked Vina, greatly frightened.

"She is a miserable drunken woman who lives next door," answered the proprietress, falsely. "You must not be frightened at her, for she can do you no harm. And you must pay no attention to what she says. Come, now, and eat your dinner."

Vina had seated herself upon the edge of the bed again, and was now weeping.

"You had better eat while your dinner is nice and warm," the woman urged; "it will not be so nice after it gets cold."

"I cannot eat," declared Vina; "I can only think—think. Will you not tell me where I am, and why I am here?"

"I have told you all that is necessary," was the reply.

"But you have told me falsely. Why have you done so? Vina Harrington is not dead, for I am she."

"It is your poor little head, your poor little head," said the woman, with pretended pity, as she moved to the door. "Your mind will soon come right, my dear. Eat your dinner, now, and then try to sleep. In an hour a servant will come for the dishes."

"Oh! do not leave me thus!" cried the poor girl, putting out her hands toward the woman; "tell me—" But the woman went out, closing and fastening the door after her.

With a bitter cry of anguish Vina threw herself upon the bed, sobbing as though her heart would break.

And so began her imprisonment in the private-mad-house.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FUNERAL TAKES PLACE.

MENTION must now be made of another person who is to play an active part in the romance.

His name has been mentioned, but he has not been properly introduced to the reader.

Harvey Baldwin was a young man of twenty-six, well-to-do and of fine appearance, and was the accepted lover of Vina Harrington.

Recently he had been on a trip to the far West, but was now returning home with all possible haste.

At St. Louis, where he had stopped over for a few days, a telegram had reached him, announcing the death of the girl he loved.

And, as though the matter had been studied by some one having an especial grudge against him, that telegram had come to him just after the departure of the last train for the East that would leave the city in several hours.

How those hours dragged can be imagined. Never had time passed so slowly for him.

He telegraphed at once, saying when he would start, and requested that he might once more look upon the dear face of the girl he loved ere she was laid away forever.

And now he was on the road.

Two o'clock came, and the funeral service was being held in the parlors of the Harrington House.

The coffin rested in the hall, between the two large rooms, and was almost buried from sight amid flowers.

Both rooms were filled with the friends of the dead girl, and the minister stood in the hall, at the head of the coffin, so that all might hear his words.

It was a solemn occasion, for Vina Harrington had been a great favorite with all who had known her.

As her friends had entered the house, nearly all had passed around the coffin to obtain a look at her face, and all were surprised to find that the coffin was closed.

No one made any comments, for all supposed that it would be opened later on.

When the minister concluded, however, he remarked:

"I am requested to say that, owing to a sad change in the appearance of the dead young lady, the coffin will not be opened."

Instantly there was a general expression of great disappointment.

Many of those present had come long distances to get one more look at Vina's well-loved face.

Some of them pressed around Irene, who was weeping bitterly, and begged her to let them have one more look at their friend.

But Irene refused.

It was far better, she told them, for them to remember her sister as they had last seen her, than to be forever haunted by a vision of her face as it now appeared.

The change, she assured them, was terrible.

Of course they could do no more, and had to give up the idea.

Among those present was an old gentleman who claimed to have been a friend of Mr. Harrington's.

He was a quiet man, and remained, with some others—in fact, a good many others—standing in the hall.

He seemed to pay close attention to all that was said and done.

This man was Speare, the detective, but he

was not in the same disguise he had worn that morning.

As Broadway Billy had not returned by noon, the detective began to feel somewhat uneasy about him.

He had thought over all he had learned from the carriage-driver, and from the visit to the West — street house, and began to see that all was not right.

He had determined to attend the funeral.

Now, when it was announced that the coffin would not be opened, he began to grow more suspicious than ever.

He could hardly bring his suspicions to a point where he could define them, but they existed.

At the last moment, almost, a young man entered the house hurriedly but quietly.

This was Harvey Baldwin.

He looked travel-worn and weary, as though he had come straight from the train to the house, as he had.

When he saw that the coffin was not open, a look of disappointment came over his face.

He asked the undertaker, though, to let him see the dead.

"The coffin has not been opened, sir," the undertaker said, "and Miss Harrington has forbidden my opening it. This is owing to the fact that the corpse is not presentable."

"But I must see her!" persisted Harvey. "She was my promised wife, and I have a right to see her."

Detective Speare listened attentively.

"Well," said the undertaker, "I cannot open the coffin without permission from Miss Harrington, and I am sure she will not grant it. If she allows you to see she must let all see, and she will tell you, as she has told every one else, that it will be far better for you to remember the young lady as you last saw her, than to be forever haunted by the horrible picture her face now presents."

"No matter what the change in her appearance is," declared the young man, "it is my duty to see her, and see her I must. It is my right."

He turned away at once to find Miss Harrington.

When he found her, though, it availed him nothing. She would not allow the coffin to be opened. What he would see, she declared, would haunt him as a horrible picture as long as he lived.

There was no help for it, so the young man had to give up, as others had done.

Harvey was no stranger to most of those present, and all who knew him sympathized with him. They could not deny, though, that if the facts were as stated, it was better the coffin should not be opened.

The room being filled, Harvey returned to the hall, where, by chance, he stopped near the detective.

A moment later and a servant approached him.

"Miss Harrington requests that you accompany her in her carriage, where she has reserved your place," he said.

"I will do so," was the reply.

The servant turned away.

Detective Speare now touched Harvey on the arm, and asked:

"Was the young lady your promised wife, sir?"

"Yes, sir," was the sad reply, "she was."

"Where can I see you for a few moments after the burial?"

"Who are you?" Harvey inquired.

"I am an old friend of Mr. Harrington's," was the reply, "and I want to have a few words with you in private."

"Is your business important?"

"It may be of importance, to you."

"Very well; name a time and place where I can see you."

The detective did so, they were agreed upon, and then Harvey went in to join Irene.

The pall-bearers had now taken their places, and the coffin was carried out, the mourners following, Harvey supporting Irene as she came from the room.

Speare hastened away at once and hired a carriage, at a stable not far away, and joined the others.

When they arrived at the cemetery, he saw that the coffin was placed in a vault.

It was soon over, and Broadway Billy was left in the house of the dead, and the iron doors were locked.

At the appointed hour, later in the day, Detective Speare and Harvey Baldwin met.

After some words of greeting, the detective said:

"I take you to be a man of strong will and determined mind."

"I have been said to possess those qualities, sir," was the reply.

"I thought I was not mistaken. Now, sir, let me ask you, what do you think of your not being allowed to see that dead girl to-day?"

"It is something I cannot understand. I have been told that the coffin was open yesterday, and that she was seen by all who called. And, too, it is said that her face was then perfectly preserved (and why should it not have been?), and that she seemed more like one sleeping than like one dead."

"So I, too, have been told; and I tell you, Mr. Baldwin, there is something wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, note these points: In the first place, is it not an unusual thing for a body to be put into its coffin, especially at this time of year, before the day of the funeral? This young woman was in her coffin all day yesterday. In the next place, is it not impossible for such a change to have taken place in so short a time? Would not some indication of it have been noticed yesterday?"

"The same questions have presented themselves to me, sir," said Harvey.

"Well, and how do you answer them?"

"I do not answer them at all. They puzzle me completely."

"And they do me, too. Now, when you were denied the privilege of seeing the body, I believe I saw a look of stern determination come over your face, as though you were resolved upon seeing it in spite of them all. Am I right?"

"Such certainly was my determination, sir," was the reply, "but I see now that I shall have to give it up. It would be folly, I fear, to attempt it."

"Why so?"

"Because, it would involve a night visit to the cemetery, and discovery would not be at all pleasant."

"Suppose you had some one to go with you, how then?"

"Old man, what do you mean?"

"I mean this," the detective answered. "At midnight to-night I am going to the cemetery to open that coffin, and if you want to go with me, I shall be glad to have your company."

"You are going to open the coffin?" Harvey exclaimed; "what was Vina Harrington to you, sir?"

"She was nothing to me; I never saw her, so far as I know."

"Then, why are you going to open the coffin?"

"Because, I want to see what is in it."

"You want to see what is in it! What, in the name of Heaven, do you mean?"

"No other words can make my meaning any clearer. I want to see what is in it."

"My God! have you, then, a suspicion that it does not contain the body of Vina Harrington?"

"I have; though I may be greatly mistaken. I am resolved to know."

"But, what is your suspicion?" Harvey asked excitedly.

"Will you first answer a question?"

"Yes."

"What is your opinion of Irene Harrington?"

"I hardly know. She is not like Vina was, and I could not trust her."

"Do you know what their father's will was?"

"No, I do not."

The detective then gave him all the particulars of the case, so far as he knew them, and he had made many inquiries into the matter since morning; and Harvey had to admit that there was good reason for suspicion, horrible as that suspicion was.

"And you will join me?" the detective asked.

"Yes, decidedly; I will go with you, for I too must know the truth."

And so it was settled. A time was named and a place of meeting appointed, and so they parted.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE CEMETERY VAULT.

"Sweet per-taters!"

Broadway Billy, and alive, of course!

When he came to, the first he realized was that he felt stiff, sore and cold.

He tried hard to think where he could be, and what had taken place.

His head ached, and he could not collect his thoughts.

All was inky darkness, and the air felt heavy and oppressive.

He wondered where he could be.

The more he tried to think the clearer his mind grew.

Trying to move, he found that he could not do so, and then he realized that he was gagged and bound.

Like a flash, then, the truth dawned upon him, causing him the mental exclamation quoted.

"Great Caesar! but they did box me up, I really believe!" he thought, in alarm. "I wonder if I'm planted. Guess I must be, for it feels most awful cold an' damp, an' there ain't a sound to be heard. I guess I'm done for this time, sure pop."

Moving his head from side to side, and also up and down, he found that he was indeed in the coffin, and that the coffin was closed.

"Billy," he mused, "you've done it jest once too often now, an' see what ye've come to. Here ye be, planted in a coffin, an' not likely ter git out till th' great trump blows. It's sad, most awful sad for us, Billy; but so it is, an' we'll have ter grin an' bear it. If we only could git out, though, wouldn't we make a rattlin' 'mongst th' dry bones?"

It was fortunate for the boy that Vina Harrington, in her great dread of being buried alive, had ordered holes put in the coffin, and the coffin placed in a vault.

Had it been otherwise, Billy would never have awakened in this world.

All these things came to his mind, as he lay there in his dark and narrow bed.

"Wonder what sort o' funeral I had," he thought. "Did Murray Hill bow its proud head an' shed tears over me any? Lord! but I'm ahead o' most folks in that way, anyhow. Too bad I couldn't ha' been awake, so's ter heard my funeral preached. It must ha' been rich. If I had been, though, I s'pose I'd wiggle an' bobbed my head till I'd made 'em understand that I was alive, an' so spoiled all th' fun."

He tried to brace up his courage, but it was almost a hopeless task. He was sick, cold, stiff, and sore, and these conditions did not tend to lessen the horrors of his position in any degree. Death stared him in the face.

He tried to draw up his legs, and thus force the lid of the coffin from its place, but could not do so. It was too firmly fastened.

"Of all th' difficulties I ever got inter," he reflected, "this one jest scoops th' turnips. No old mummy was ever laid away fer keeps any more keerful an' secure. Lord! but it's awful ter think of! How long hev I been here? Give it up. Mebby I've got ter stay right here till I starve, if I don't die o' hunger first. Ugh! but it is some cold, too. Well, since I can't help myself any I reckon I'll have ter grin an' bear it. Mebby some one will come round afore many hours, and then I'll do my best ter make 'em hear me."

It was a little after midnight, and the effects of the drug that had been given to him had passed.

"Fer a boy o' my age an' size," his thoughts ran on, "I seem ter git inter more trouble than any other feller I ever heard of. Once let me git out o' this box, though, an' we'll see if I can't unload some o' my troubles where they belong. It's most enuff ter make angels weep, ter see th' way I'm 'posed on jest 'cause I'm small. Lord! if I could only have fer jest five minutes th' left ear of Inspector Br— Hello! what's that?"

He had heard a noise.

Listening sharply, he heard it again.

It sounded like two pieces of metal being struck together lightly, and added to that sound there presently came another like the creaking of a heavy door.

Then steps were heard, and the door creaked shut again.

Soon after there came light through the holes in the coffin.

Then voices were heard.

Billy remained perfectly still for the present, wanting to learn what was going on before he made his presence known.

The two men who had entered were Detective Speare and Harvey Baldwin.

"So far so good," remarked Speare, as he flashed his light around the dismal place, and now for the coffin."

"Sweet per-taters!" Billy tried to shout out, instantly recognizing the detective's voice, "if that ain't Speare then I'm a howlin' monkey. What in wonders is he doin' here?"

"Yes," repeated Harvey, "so far so good, and now for the coffin. We shall soon know their secret now, if there is any to learn."

"Which is the coffin?" asked Speare.

"This is the one," answered Harvey, laying

his hand upon the end of the box of the newly introduced casket as it lay in its niche.

Billy's heart jumped for joy. He was to be rescued!

"All right," Speare rejoined, placing the lantern upon the floor. "Now help me draw the box from this hole so that we can get at it."

The two men carefully drew the boxed casket forth from the burial alcove and placed it upon the floor. "Now hold the light," ordered Speare, "and I'll soon have the box cover off."

Then, the imprisoned boy heard the screw-driver at work, and no pen can adequately express the joy he felt.

"Lordy-oh!" he exclaimed in thought, "won't there be a surprise-party here, in a few minutes! Won't their eyes hang out like goose eggs!"

In a few moments the light top board of the box was removed, and the coffin revealed.

"We had better lift the coffin out, so as to get at it more conveniently," suggested the detective. This was done and the coffin with its head resting on the box was in proper position for operations.

It took some little time to remove the screws, but at last the task was done.

"Now," said Speare, "hold the bulls-eye close and be prepared for whatever is to be seen."

"I am ready," answered Harvey, his voice a little shaky, "take it off."

Speare did so, and Billy, half dead as he was, could not resist the temptation to wink at them in the drollest way imaginable.

Both men uttered exclamations of surprise, and stared at the boy in amazement.

"It is my little friend, Broadway Billy!" exclaimed Speare, after a moment. "This is the boy I mentioned to you. You see there is crooked work going on, and my life upon it this boy knows the whole secret."

"There is villainy afloat inde-d!" agreed Harvey, "and dearly shall the evil ones pay for what they have done."

In a short time the lower half of the lid was removed, and Billy was lifted out and freed of his bonds.

But he could not stand. The effect of the powerful drug, together with his long confinement, had rendered him helpless.

Speare happened to have some brandy with him, and he hastened to pour a little of it into the boy's mouth. And then he and Harvey set to work to exercise his limbs to bring the blood back to its proper warmth and activity.

For fully half an hour they worked with him untiringly, and at the end of that time he was able to stand. But he was very weak, and, for once in his life, could hardly speak.

"We must get him home as soon as we can," declared Speare, "and call a doctor to him. We can do nothing now until we learn what he knows."

"I agree with you perfectly," Harvey acquiesced. "What about the coffin, though? If it is found empty before we have time to act, will our birds not take flight?"

"You are right. We must put something into it, and replace the lid as we found it."

"What shall it be?"

"Perhaps we can find some stones. Ah! here is just what we want."

In one corner of the vault was a heap of bricks, and to that the detective pointed as he spoke.

"They will answer nicely," Harvey agreed.

Telling Billy to sit down, which the boy was glad enough to do, the two set to work to place enough bricks in the coffin to equal his weight, as nearly as they could guess.

It was not a very great task, and when they were done, having placed the bricks in carefully so that they would not be likely to move when the coffin came to be lifted, the detective put on the lid and screwed it down.

"There," he declared, "unless they open it again they will never know the difference."

Making sure that they were leaving things about as they had found them in the vault, the two men assisted Billy to rise and helped him toward the door.

When the door was reached, Speare turned the shade in his lantern and they went out in darkness.

The fresher air made Billy feel better almost at once.

Speare secured the door as he had found it, and then, helping Billy along, they started to leave the cemetery.

They were nearly to the point where they had entered, when, suddenly, they were accosted by a watchman.

"Look 'e here, now," he exclaimed, "where be you fellers goin' an' what ye been up to?"

Detective Speare flashed his lantern upon the

man instantly, and saw that he had a revolver in hand.

"I'm an officer," he explained, "and had to chase this young bound in here to catch him. See my badge?"

"Oh! that's all right!" declared the watchman, at sight of the badge; "what's he been up to?"

"Snatched this gentleman's tucker."

"Well, I'm glad ye got him. There's too many o' his kind 'round here o' nights."

"You are right."

The watchman thus disposed of, they were soon out of the grounds, and then they lost no time in making their way to the place where they had left their carriage.

It was still there, and getting in, they were soon speeding away toward the city.

Detective Speare thought that Billy's own home would be the best place to take the boy to, and knowing where it was, directed the driver accordingly.

On the way they did not press the boy for any information, but allowed him to sleep, as he seemed greatly inclined to do.

Mrs. Weston was overjoyed, as may be imagined, and lost no time in caring for her boy.

It was not now considered necessary to call a doctor, and leaving Billy safe in bed and sound asleep, Speare and Mr. Baldwin went away, promising to call at an early hour next morning.

For once Broadway Billy had met with an adventure that proved too much for him. The final round of the death racket was yet to be fought, however.

At quite an early hour next day, Joel Buryall, the undertaker, and one of his assistants, drove out to the cemetery.

The health officers, Buryall said, had ordered him to bury the body of Vina Harrington at once.

The coffin was taken from the vault, and a grave was prepared.

While the grave was being dug, Buryall tried to get an opportunity to look into the coffin, but could not do so without the others present seeing him, so he gave it up.

When the grave was ready the coffin was lowered into it, and, as the evil rascal thought, all was over with Broadway Billy. Little did he imagine that the boy was at that moment alive, well, and free, and that his own doom was near at hand.

CHAPTER XV.

BAGGING THE GAME.

THE hour was early, too, when Detective Speare and Harvey Baldwin returned to see Broadway Billy.

Billy was not yet awake.

His mother would call him, if they wanted her to, but she was of the opinion that he needed the rest badly.

"No, do not call him yet," demurred Speare; "let him have another hour, anyhow. We want his mind to be perfectly clear. It is early and we can wait."

Harvey was all impatience to learn where Vina was, but saw the necessity of making haste slowly.

The two men settled down in the widow's comfortable room to pass the hour.

"We can afford to wait," explained Speare, as he noticed Harvey's uneasiness, "for we have almost a sure thing before us. This brave boy has been into the whole racket, and has no doubt done good work. It was the knowledge he had gained that led to his being put out of the way more than likely."

The minutes dragged slowly, though, and the first half of the hour seemed like an age.

Before the second half was near gone, they heard the boy bound out of bed in an adjoining room with the exclamation:

"Sweet pertaters!"

Richard was himself again!

"Great stars!" the boy exclaimed, as he hurried into his clothes, "have I been a-dreamin', mom, or have I been inter th' worst consarned racket that I ever was in? Seems ter me—"

"Billy, Billy!" his mother called out, "do not go on so. Here are gentlemen to see you."

"Gentlemen ter see me? Good enough. I'll be there in jist two shakes. Is it Inspector Br— Hello, it is you, Speare, is it?"

"How do you feel?" Speare asked.

"Good," was the reply; "an' I've got one of th' greatest tales o' hard times and bad blood ter pour inter yer ears that ye ever listened to. I've been on th' war-path, I have, an' I've got a bar'l o' scalp. I—"

"Billy, Billy!" his mother reproved.

"Oh! but it's a fact, mom, sure's ye're born! I came purty close ter losin' my own hair, though, I guess, from th' gen'l' pearances o' things. Sa7, who is this gentleman?" indicating Harvey.

"This is Mr. Harvey Baldwin," the detective answered.

"I reckon I've heard his name before," remarked Billy. "You're th' lover of th' gal they've shut up in th' mad-house, an'—"

"What!" cried Harvey, "Vina Harrington incarcerated in a mad-house?"

"If that word means shut up an' locked up, she is," was the prompt response.

"Now, Billy," interrupted Speare, "we want you to give us the whole story, and tell us all you know. You have had a serious battle this time, and all the honors of the case are yours."

"All right, pardner; here goes!"

Billy went ahead, then, and in his own homely way, and in his own terse language, explained all that had taken place, so far as he knew it.

He was listened to attentively.

When he had done, Speare gave him an account of the funeral, and of his own part in the game.

"Give me yer hand!" said Billy, in a choked voice. "You've saved my life. Only fer you I reckon I'd never seen New York again."

Speare gave his hand and the boy squeezed it silently.

"Now," Billy cried, "let's get right down ter biz an' scoop in our game. I'll turn it all over ter you, Speare, bein' as you're a trifle older'n I be, but I mean ter be on hand at th' b'ilin', we bet!"

"That is just what we will do, my boy," Speare agreed; "and then," he added, "I have other work for you."

"I'm yer turnip, every time," Billy declared.

"I ain't afraid o' nothin', now. After a feller has had his funeral preached, an' has been buried, he'd orter be used ter hard knocks."

"I do wish you would give up such work," urged his mother. "You keep me in a constant worry."

"No need ter worry 'bout me any more mom," Billy averred, cheerfully, "fer I wasn't born ter be cut off in my youth an' beauty by consarned diffikalties; sweet pertaters, no!"

Catching his mother around the neck, then, and giving her a hearty kiss, the boy announced that he was ready.

He was even forgetting his breakfast, so anxious was he to see the end of his detective battle.

Both Speare and his mother, though, insisted upon his eating, so he did so.

In half an hour the three left the house, and Speare went at once to a police justice and obtained warrants of arrest for every one of the guilty ones.

Then, accompanied by four policemen, they turned their steps toward the Woo-ter street mad-house, Broadway Billy leading the way.

Madam Winchester happened to come to the door, instead of a servant, and at sight of the policeman she nearly fainted.

"Madam," said the detective, "you are our prisoner!"

"What does this mean?" the woman demanded, trying to put on a bold front. "I fear there is some mistake."

"I guess not," suggested Speare; and he motioned one of the policemen to take her in charge.

"Bet yer life there bain't no mistake!" cried Broadway Billy. "We've got ye dead to rights; yer jig is up, ye old rip!"

"And now show me where the young lady is," demanded Harvey Baldwin, all impatience and anxiety.

"Foller me, then," exhorted Billy, and he started up the stairs two steps at a time.

Speare told his men to allow no one to leave the house, and he and Harvey followed the boy.

When they came to the top floor, the detective stopped in wonder.

"To think," he mused, "that such a horrible den as this could exist in New York!"

Billy pointed out the room Vina was in, and, after knocking, Harvey threw off the hooks, opened the door and entered.

With a scream of joy Vina sprang into his arms.

"I knew you would come!" she cried.

"I am glad I have found you, my darling," Harvey murmured; "and we owe it all to this wonderful boy!"

"Draw it mild," warned Billy.

Harvey had brought a cab, and he led Vina from the house at once and brought her home—to his home.

The other cells were opened, and seven other most unhappy and wretched prisoners were found. A sickening sight they presented. They were taken care of by the police, and were transferred to charitable institutions. Four were soon released as sane; one died; and the other two were sent to an asylum as really insane—made so by their frightful incarceration in that iniquitous den.

Having disposed of the prisoners, and left a policeman in charge of the house, Detective Speare proceeded next to the hotel where he knew Hoodley was stopping.

Broadway Billy went, too, of course.

They found Hoodley in his room.

At sight of Billy the man turned deathly pale, and he tried to rush from the room and escape.

The villain well knew what it meant!

Speare was too quick for him, however, and snapped a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists before he had time to offer much resistance.

"Your little game is stopped, my nobby rascal," he said. "You are my prisoner."

Hoodley stormed and raved, asserting that it was all a mistake, but to no purpose, and he was led away.

"You kin safely bet it ain't no mistake," observed Billy. "It ain't half as much a mistake as th' one you made in puttin' me inter that coffin. It's about your turn ter be boxed up now, but it won't be in a coffin; it'll be in a stone jug."

After disposing of Hoodley, they next called at the undertaker's place.

He was not in, having, as stated, gone out to the cemetery.

He was found later in the day, and at sight of Billy he was completely paralyzed.

It was of no use for him to deny his part in the affair.

"It ain't no use, Buryall," observed Billy, "fer we hev got ye right on th' hip. Ye made a big slip-up when ye set out ter bury me, Mr. Buryall, an' I guess ye've buried all ye will fer some time to come, for we'll bury you in Sing Sing!"

He, too, was locked up.

This was just the fun Billy liked, and the rascals knew that they were in a bad place.

The next one called on, after Hoodley, was the doctor.

"Hello! Doctor, how d'ye do?" called out Billy, when they entered his office. "I've come back to tell ye that yer medicine didn't do me no good."

The doctor's face was a study.

"You are my prisoner, sir," announced the detective, quietly, snapping the bracelets upon him.

"What means this outrage?" cried the doctor fiercely.

"You will learn all in good time," the detective responded.

"Sweet pertaters, yes," echoed Billy. "You will learn that it takes more'n one dose o' yer vile medicine ter kill a lad o' my size an' color, an' more'n one coffin ter hold him. Some more things ye'll learn, too, more'n likely. Oh, ye'r bad medicine—you be!"

The next person arrested was Carter.

Like the others, he made much ado, but it was useless.

And when he saw Billy— Well, he could have been knocked down with a straw.

"Surprisin', ain't it?" remarked Billy. "I tell ye, Carter, this is a great world o' surprises, ups an' downs, for sich like thieves as you!"

"How did you escape?" Carter demanded.

"That'll be somethin' fer ye to puzzle yer brain over when ye get up ter yer new home at Sing Twice," Billy answered; "you'll have plenty of time there, to wish you hadn't made my acquaintance."

It now remained to arrest Irene Harrington.

When the detective went to the Harrington house, though, he found everything in a state of excitement.

Irene had only a few moments before shot and killed herself!

In some way Hoodley had managed to get word to her that all was lost, after his arrest, and she had taken her own life.

"She couldn't ha' done a better thing, I reckon," decided Broadway Billy, "fer she was a bad egg. That sister o' hern is well rid o' sich a fiend."

"So crime is always rewarded, sooner or later," observed Speare. "There is nothing like living an' honest, upright life, my boy. Sin is fair to look upon, and very enticing; but the moment you raise the veil you see the grim, gaunt specter, Death, grinning at you from behind."

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

JOSEPH HOODLEY, Bob Carter, Joel Buryall, Phelps Ketcham, and Madam Winchester, all received the punishment they so richly deserved.

Irene Harrington was decently buried, and Vina at once gave her share of her father's fortune to charitable institutions.

It was a terrible blow to Vina, for she always loved Irene.

Harvey Baldwin and Vina Harrington were married, in due time, and Broadway Billy attended the wedding.

Billy has many friends in New York, and among them Harvey and Vina do not hold second place to any.

As soon as the arrests in this case were made, Billy performed the work required of him by Detective Speare, and with great credit to himself.

He and Speare are the best of friends, and Billy quite frequently assists him in the working up of a blind case.

But, Billy is the same as ever, to his street partner, and he and Skinny get along nicely together in their business.

Skinny, though, declares that Billy was not cut out for a merchant, a fact which Billy begins to realize.

"You'll never amount to anything," Skinny tells him, "until you kin shake off that awful detective fever an' settle down to biz. You're bound ter keep on until you git killed, an' then I'll have ter go inter mournin'."

"I tell ye I ain't ter be killed by no pesky rascals," Billy answered. "I'm bound ter live my full number o' years, we bet! An' I'm goin' ter keep right on bein' pizen ter all sorts o' evil doin's an' rascality. I'm a terror when I get wound up, we bet! I'm bound ter be chief o' plice afore I die, or somethin' in that line. Didn't I handle that last case like a daisy? Didn't I make a good showin' in th' big racket? even if I did get put in a coffin an' planted? I tell ye, Skinny, I'm a game bird, I am; I ain't got no wings or tail, but I get there jest th' same."

THE END.

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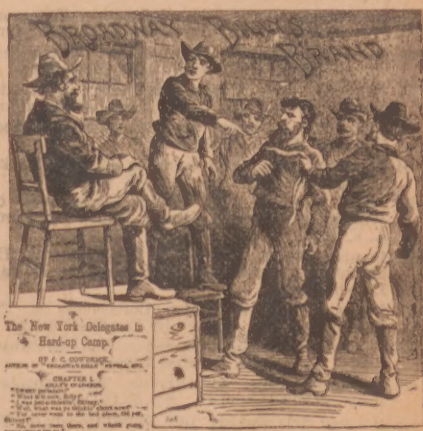


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